STEVE YEAGER

BY

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Before Steve Yeager, cowpuncher, has been with the Lunar Film Company on the Mexican border for many days, he makes two discoveries: first, that Chad Harrison, another member of the company, is an expert cattle rustler and in league with Mexican bandits; second, that Ruth Seymour is made very unhappy by the attentions of this same Chad. Having a natural taste for trouble and a total ignorance of fear, and futhermore having himself fallen under the spell of Ruth's lovely but troubled face, Steve decides to break into the game and put things right. How he does it is told in a novel brimful of excitement, with enough gun play and adventure to suit anyone, and some vein of romance

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RUTH

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BY

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

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Steve Yeager

CHAPTER I

STEVE MAKES A MISTAKE

STEVE YEAGER held his bronco to a Spanish trot. Somewhere in front of him, among the brown hill swells that rose and fell like waves of the sea, lay Los Robles and breakfast. One solitary silver dollar, too lonesome even to jingle, lay in his flatulent trouser pocket. After he and Four Bits had eaten, two quarters would take the place of the big cartwheel. Then would come dinner, a second transfer of capital, and his pocket would be empty as a cow's stomach after a long drive.

Being dead broke, according to the viewpoint of S. Yeager, is right and fitting after a jaunt to town when one has a good job back in the hills. But it happened he had no more job than a rabbit. Wherefore, to keep up his spirits he chanted the endless metrical version of the adventures of Sam Bass, who

"... started out to Texas a cowboy for to be,
And a kinder-hearted fellow you scarcely ever'd see."

Steve had not quit his job. It had quit him. A few years earlier the Lone Star Cattle Com-

pany had reigned supreme in Dry Sandy Valley and the territory tributary thereto. Its riders had been kings of the range. That was before the tide of settlement had spilled into the valley, before nesters had driven in their prairie schooners, homesteaded the water-holes, and strung barb-wire fences across the range. Line-riders and dry farmers and irrigators had pushed the cow-puncher to one side. Sheep had come bleating across the desert to wage war upon the cattle. Finally Uncle Sam had sliced off most of the acreage still left and called it a forest reserve.

Wherefore the Lone Star outfit had thrown up its hands, sold its holdings, and moved to Los Angeles to live. Wherefore also Steve Yeager, who did not know Darwin from a carburetor, had by process of evolution been squeezed out of the occupation he had followed all of his twenty-three years since he could hang on to a saddle-horn. He had mournfully foreseen the end when the schoolhouse was built on Pine Knob and little folks went down the road with their arms twined around the waist of teacher. After grizzled Tim Sawyer made bowlegged tracks straight for that schoolmarm and matrimony, his friends realized that the joyous whoop of the puncher would not much longer be heard in the land. The range-rider must dwindle to a farmer or get off the earth. Steve was getting off the earth.

Since Steve was of the sunburnt State, still a boy, and by temperament incurably optimistic, he sang cheerfully. He wanted to forget that he had eaten neither supper nor breakfast. So he carried Mr. Bass through many adventures till that genial bandit

"... sold out at Custer City and there got on a spree,
And a tougher lot of cowboys you never'd hope to see."

Four Bits had topped a rise and followed the road down in its winding descent. After the nomadic fashion of Arizona the trail circled around a tongue of a foothill which here jutted out. Voices from just beyond the bend startled Yeager. One of them was raised impatiently.

"Won't do, Harrison. Be rougher. Throw her on her knees and tie her hands."

The itinerant road brought Steve in another moment within view. He saw a girl picking poppies. Two men rode up and swung from their saddles. They talked with her threateningly. She shrank back in fear. One of them seized her wrists and threw her down.

"Lively, now. Into the pit with her. Get the stuff across," urged a short fat man with a cigar in his mouth who was standing ten or fifteen yards back from the scene of action.

Steve had put his horse at a gallop the moment the girl had been seized. It struck him there

was something queer about the affair, — something not quite natural to which he could not put a name. But he did not stop to reason out the situation. Dragging his pony to a slithering halt, he leaped to the ground.

"Get busy, Jackson. You ain't in a restaurant waiting for a meal," the little fat man reminded one of his tools irritably. Then, as he caught sight of Steve, "What the hell!"

Yeager's left shot forward, all the weight and muscle of one hundred and seventy pounds of live cowpuncher behind it. Villain Number One went to the ground as if a battering-ram had hit him between the eyes.

"Lay hands on a lady, will you?"

Steve turned to Villain Number Two, who backed away rapidly in alarm.

"What's eatin' you? We ain't hurtin' her any, you mutt."

The girl, still crouched on the ground, turned with a nervous little laugh to the man who had been directing operations: —

"What d' you know about that, Billie? The rube swallowed it all. You gotta raise my salary."

The cowpuncher felt in the pit of his stomach the same sensation he had known when an elevator in Denver had dropped beneath his feet too suddenly. The young woman was rouged

and painted to the ears. Never in its palmiest days had the 'Dobe Dollar's mirrors reflected a costume more gaudy than the one she was wearing. The men too were painted and dolled up extravagantly in vaqueros' costumes that were the limit of absurdity. Had they all escaped from a madhouse? Or was he, Steve Yeager, in a pipe-dream?

From a near grove of cottonwoods half a dozen men in chaps came running. Assured of their proximity, the fat little fellow pawed the air with rage.

"Ever see such rotten luck? Spoiled the whole scene. Say, you Rip Van Winkle, think we came out here for the ozone?"

One of the men joined the young woman, who was assisting the villain Yeager had knocked out. The others crowded around him in excitement, all expostulating at once. They were dressed wonderfully and amazingly as cowpunchers, but they were painted frauds in spite of the careful ostentation of their costumes. Steve's shiny leathers and dusty hat missed the picturesque, but he looked indigenous and they did not. He was at his restful ease, this slender, brown man, negligent, careless, eyes twinkling but alert. The brand of the West was stamped indelibly on him.

"I ce'tainly must 'a' spilled the beans. Looks

like I done barked up the wrong tree," he drawled amiably.

A man who had been standing on a box behind some kind of a masked battery jumped down and joined the group.

"Gee! I've got a bully picture of our anxious friend laying out Harrison. Nothing phony about that, Threewit. Won't go in this reel, but she'll make a humdinger in some other. Say, didn't Harrison hit the dust fine! Funny you lads can't ever pull off a fall like that."

An annoyed voice, both raucous and sneering, interrupted his enthusiasm. "Just stick around, Mr. Camera Man, and you'll get a chance to do another bit of real life that ain't faked. I'm goin' to hammer the head off Buttinski presently."

The camera man, an alert, boyish fellow as thin as a lath, turned and grinned. Harrison was sitting up a little unsteadily. Burning black eyes, set in sockets of extraordinary depths, blazed from a face sinister enough to justify Steve's impression of him as a villain. The shoulders of the man were very broad and set with the gorilla hunch; he was deep-chested and lean-loined. His eyes shifted with a quick, furtive menace. His companions might be imitation cowpunchers, but if Yeager was any judge this was no imitation bad man.

"Going to eat him alive, are you?" the camera man wanted to know pleasantly.

Steve pushed through to Harrison. A whimsical little smile of apology crinkled the boyish face.

"It's on me, compadre. I'm a rube, and anything else you like. And I sure am sorry for going off half-cocked."

A wintry frost was in the jet bead eyes that looked up at the puncher. The sitting man did not recognize the extended hand.

"You'll be a heap sorrier before I'm through with you," he growled. "I'm goin' to beat your head off and learn you to mind your own business."

"Interesting if true," retorted Steve lightly. "And maybeso you're right. A man can't always most likely tell. Take a watermelon now. You can't tell how good it is till you thump it. Same way with a man, I've heard say."

He turned to the young woman, whose bright brown eyes were lingering upon him curiously. This was no novel experience to him. He wore his splendid youth so jauntily and yet so casually that the gaze of a girl was likely to be drawn in his direction a second and a third time. In spite of his youthfulness there was in his face a certain sun-and-wind-bitten maturity, a steadiness of the quiet eye that promised efficiency. The

film actress sensed the same competent strength in the brown, untorn hand that assisted her to rise to her feet. His friendly smile showed the flash of white, regular teeth.

"The rube apologizes, ma'am. He's just in from Cactus Center and never did see one of those moving-picture outfits before. Thirty-eleven things were in sight as I happened round that bend, but the only one I glimmed was you being mistreated. Corking chance for a grand-stand play. So I sailed in pronto. 'Course I should 've known better, but I did n't."

Maisie Winters was the name of the young woman. She played the leads in one of the Southwest companies of the Lunar Film Manufacturers. Her charming face was known and liked on the screens of several continents. Now it broke into lines of mischievous amusement.

"I don't mind if Mr. Harrison does n't." She flashed a gay, inquiring look toward that discomfited villain, who was leaning for support on his accomplice Jackson and glaring at Yeager. Impudently she tilted her chin back toward the puncher. "Are you always so — so impetuous? If so, there's a fortune waiting for you in the moving-picture field."

Yeager did not object to having so attractive a young woman as this one poke fun at him. He grinned joyfully.

"Me! I'm open to an engagement, ma'am."

The short fat man whom Maisie Winters had called Billie looked sharply at the cowpuncher out of shrewd gray eyes.

"Where you been working?" he demanded abruptly.

"With the Lone Star outfit."

"Get fired?"

"Company gone out of business — country getting too popular, what with homesteaders, forest rangers, and Mary's little lamb," explained Steve.

"Hm! Can you ride a bucker?"

"I can pull leather and kinder stick on."

"I'll try you out for a week at two-fifty a day if you like."

"You've hired Steve Yeager," promptly announced the owner of that name.

CHAPTER II

"ENOUGH'S A-PLENTY"

WHILE driving his car back to Los Robles, Billie Threewit, producing director at the border studio of the Lunar Film Manufacturers, indulged in caustic comment on his own idiocy.

"Now, what in hell did I take on this Yeager rube for? He had just finished crabbing one scene. Was n't that enough without me paying him good money to spoil more? Harrison's sore on him too. There's going to be trouble there. He ain't going to stand for that roughhouse stuff a little bit."

Frank Farrar, the camera man, took a more cheerful view of the situation.

"He's a find, if you ask me — the real thing in cowpunchers. And I don't know as this outfit has to be run to please Harrison. The big bully has got us all stepping sideways and tiptoeing so as not to offend him. I'm about fed up with the brute. Wish this rube would mop the earth up with him when Harrison gets gay."

"No chance. Harrison's a bully all right, but he's one grand little fighter too. You saw him clean up that bunch of greasers. He's there with

both feet on the Marquis of Q. business, and don't you forget it. I put up with more from him than I ever did from a dozen other actors because he's so mean when he's sulky."

"Here too," agreed Farrar. "It's take your hat off when you speak to Mr. Chad Harrison. I can't yell at him that he's getting out of the picture; I've got to pull the Alphonse line of talk. — 'Mr. Harrison, if you'd be so kind as to get that left hind hoof of yours six inches more to the right.' He makes me good and weary."

"He gets his stuff across good. Was n't for that I would n't stand for him a minute. But we're down here, son, to get this three-reel Mexican war dope. As long as Harrison delivers the goods we'll have to put up with him."

"Well, I'm going to give this Yeager lad a tip what he's up against. Then if he wants to he can light out before Harrison gets to him."

Farrar was as good as his word. As soon as he reached the hotel he dropped around to the room where the new extra was staying. His knock brought no answer, but as the door was ajar the camera man stepped across the threshold.

Steve lay on the bed asleep, his lithe, compact figure stretched at negligent ease. The flannel shirt was open at the throat, the strong muscles of which sloped beautifully into the splendid shoulders. There was strength in the clean-cut

jaw of the brown face. It was an easy guess that he had wandered by paths crooked as well as straight, that he had taken the loose pleasures of his kind joyously. But when he had followed forbidden trails it had been from the sheer youthful exuberance of life in him and not from weakness. Farrar judged that the heart of the young vagabond was sound, that the desert winds and suns had kept his head washed clean of shameful thoughts.

The cowpuncher opened his eyes. He looked at his visitor without speaking.

"Did n't expect to find you asleep," apologized the camera man.

Yeager got up and stretched his supple body in a yawn. "That's all right. Just making up the sleep I lost last night on the road. No matter a-tall."

He was in blue overalls, the worn shiny chaps tossed across the back of a chair. On the table lay the dusty, pinched-in hat, through the disreputable crown of which Farrar had lately seen a lock of his brindle hair rising like an aigrette.

"Glad to have you join us. We need riders like you. Say, it was worth five dollars to me to see the way you laid out Harrison."

The cowpuncher's boyish face clouded.

"I'm right sorry about that. It ce'tainly was a fool play. I don't blame Harrison for getting sore."

"He's sore all right. That's what I came to see you about. He's a rowdy, Harrison is. And he'll make you trouble."

"Most generally I don't pack a gun," Yeager observed casually.

"It won't be a gun play; not to start with, anyhow. He used to be a prizefighter. He'll beat you up."

"Well, it don't hurt a man's system to absorb a licking once in a blue moon."

The cowpuncher said it smilingly, with a manner of negligent competence that came from an experience of many dangers faced, of many perilous ways safely trodden.

Farrar had not yet quite discharged his mind. "There's nothing to prevent you from slipping round to the stable and pulling your freight quietly."

"Except that I don't want to," added the new extra. "No, sir. I've got a job and I'm staying with it. I'll sit here like a horned toad till the boss gives me my time."

The camera man beamed. To meet so debonair and care-free a specimen of humanity warmed the cockles of his heart.

"I'll bet you're some scrapper yourself," he suggested.

"Oh, no. He'll lick me, I reckon. Say, what do they hold you up for at this hacienda?"

The lank camera man supplied information, adding that he knew of a good cheap boarding-place where one or two of the company put up.

"If you say so, I'll take you right round there."

Yeager reached promptly for his hat. "You talk like a dollar's worth of nickels rattling out of a slot machine — right straight to the point."

They walked together down the white, dusty street, crossed the outskirts of the old Mexican adobe town, and came to a suburb of bungalows. In front of one of these Farrar stopped. He unlatched the gate.

"Here we are."

There was an old-fashioned garden of roses and mignonettes and hollyhocks, with crimson ramblers rioting over the wire trellis in front of the broad porch. A girl with soft, thick, blue-black hair was bending over a rosebush. She was snipping dead shoots with a pair of scissors. At the sound of their feet crunching the gravel of the walk, her slender figure straightened and she turned to them. The ripe lips parted above pearly teeth in a smile of welcome to the camera man.

"I've come begging again, Miss Ruth," explained Farrar. "This is Mr. Yeager, a new member of our company. He wants to find a good boarding-place, so of course I thought of your mother. Don't tell me that you can't take him."

A little frown of doubt furrowed her forehead. "I don't know, Mr. Farrar. Our tables are about full. I'll ask mother."

The eyes of the girl rested for an instant on the brown-faced youth whose application the camera man was backing. He had taken off his hat, and the sun-pour was on his tawny hair, on the lean, bronzed face and broad, muscular shoulders. In his torn, discolored hat, his stained and travel-worn clothes, he looked a very prince of tramps. But in his quiet, steady gaze was the dynamic spark of self-respect that forebade her to judge him by his garb.

A faint flush burned in the dusky cheeks to which the long lashes drooped because of a touch of embarrassment. He had seemed to read her hesitation with an inner amusement that found expression in his gray-blue eyes.

"Tell her I'll be much obliged if she'll take me," Yeager said in his gentle drawl.

Considering his request, she stripped the gauntlet without purpose from one of her little brown hands. A solitaire sparkled on the third finger. Again she murmured, "I'll ask mother"; then turned and flashed up the steps, her slender limbs carrying with fluent grace the pliant young body.

Presently appeared on the porch a plump, matronly woman of a wholesome cleanness with-

out and within. Judging by fugitive dabs of flour which decorated her temple and her forehead, she had been making bread or pies at the time she had been called by her daughter. Much of her life she had lived in the Southwest, and one glance at Yeager was enough to satisfy her. Through the dust and tarnished clothes of him youth shone resplendent. The sun was still in his brindle hair, in his gay eyes. She had a boy of her own, and the heart of her warmed to him.

In five sentences they had come to an arrangement. The barn behind the house had been remodeled so that it contained several bedrooms. Into one of these Yeager was to move his scant effects at once.

He and Farrar walked back to the hotel together. Harrison was waiting for them on the porch. As soon as he caught sight of the cowpuncher he strode forward. The straight line of his set mouth looked like a gash in a melon.

"Will you have it here or back of the garage?" he demanded, getting straight to business.

"Any place that suits you," agreed Steve affably. "Won't the bulls pinch us if we do a rough-house here?"

Harrison turned with triumphant malice to Farrar.

"Get your camera. You say you don't like phony stuff. Good enough. I'll pull off the real

goods for you in licking a rube. There's plenty of room back of the garage."

The camera man protested. "See here, Harrison. Yeager ain't looking for trouble. He told you he was sorry. It was an accident. What's the use of bearing a grudge?"

The heavy glared at him. "You in this, Mr. Farrar? You're liable to have a heluvatime if you butt into my business without an invite. Shack — and git that camera."

Yeager nodded to his new friend. "Go ahead and get it. We'll be waiting back of the garage."

Farrar hesitated, the professional instinct in him awake and active.

"If you're dead keen on a mix-up, Harrison, why not come over to the studio where I can get the best light? We'll make an indoor set of it."

"Go you," promptly agreed Harrison. His vanity craved a picture of him thrashing the extra, a good one that the public could see and that he could afterwards gloat over himself.

Yeager laughed in his slow way. "I'm to be massa-creed to make a Roman holiday, am I? All right. Might as well begin earning that two-fifty per I've been promised."

The news spread, as if on the wings of the wind. Before Farrar had a stage arranged to suit him and his camera ready, a dozen members

of the company drifted in with a casual manner of having arrived accidentally. Fleming Lennox, leading man, appeared with Cliff Manderson, chief comedian for the Lunar border company. Baldy Cummings, the property man, strolled leisurely in to look over some costumes. But Steve observed that he was panting rapidly.

As he sat on a soap box waiting for Farrar to finish his preparations, Yeager became aware that Lennox was watching him closely. He did not know that the leading man would cheerfully have sacrificed a week's salary to see Harrison get the trimming he needed. The handsome young film actor was an athlete, a trained boxer, but the ex-prizefighter had given him the thrashing of his life two months before. He simply had lacked the physical stamina to weather the blows that came from those long, gorilla-like arms with the weight of the heavy, rounded shoulders back of them. The fight had not lasted five minutes.

"Shapes well," murmured Manderson, nodding toward the new extra.

The leading man agreed without much hope. He conceded the boyish cowpuncher a beautiful trim figure, with breadth of shoulder, grace of poise, and long, flowing muscles that rippled under the healthy skin like those of a panther in motion. But these would serve him little unless he was an experienced boxer. Harrison had

tremendous strength and power; moreover, he knew the game from years of battle in the ring.

"He'll lose — won't be able to stand the gaff," Lennox replied gloomily, his eyes fixed on Yeager as the young fellow rose lightly and moved forward to meet his opponent.

The extra was as tall as Harrison, but he looked like a boy beside him, so large and massive did the heavy bulk. The contrast between them was so great that Yeager was scarcely conceded a fighting chance. Steve himself knew quite well that he was in for a licking at the hands of this wall-eyed Hercules with the leathery brown face.

He got it, efficiently and scientifically, but not before Harrison had found out he was in a fight. The big man disdained any defense except that which went naturally with his crouch. He had a tremendously long reach and knew how to get the weight of his shoulders behind his punishing blows. Usually Harrison did all the fighting. The other man was at the receiving end.

It was a little different this time. Yeager met his first rush with a straight left that got home and jarred the prizefighter to his heels. To see the look on the face of the heavy, compound of blank astonishment and chagrin, was worth the price of admission.

Lennox sang out encouragement. "Good boy. Go to him."

Harrison put his head down and rushed. His arms worked like flails. They beat upon Steve's body and face as a hammer does upon an anvil. Only by his catlike agility and the toughness born of many clean years in the saddle did the cowpuncher weather for the time the hurricane that lashed at him. He dodged and ducked and parried by instinct, smothering what blows he could, evading those he might, absorbing the ones he must. Out of that first mêlée he came reeling and dizzy, quartering round and round before the panting professional.

The bully enraged was not a sight pleasant to see. He was too near akin to the primeval brute. He glared savagely at his victim, who grinned back at him with an indomitable jauntiness.

"This is the life," the cowpuncher assured his foe cheerfully after dodging a blow that was like the kick of a mule.

Harrison rocked him with a short stiff uppercut. "Glad you like it," he jeered.

Yeager crossed with his right, catching him flush on the cheek. "Here's your receipt for the same," he beamed.

Like a wild bull the prizefighter was at him again. He beat down the cowpuncher's defense

and mauled him savagely with all the punishing skill of his craft. Steve was a man of his hands. He had held his own in many a rough-and-tumble bout. But he had no science except that which nature had given him. As long as a man could, he stood up to Harrison's trained skill. When at last he was battered to the ground it was because the strength had all oozed out of him.

Harrison stood over him, swaggering. "Had enough?"

Where he had been flung, against one of the studio walls, Steve sat dizzily, his head reeling. He saw things through a mist in a queer jerky way. But still a smile beamed on his disfigured face.

"Surest thing you know."

"Don't want some more of the same?" jeered the victor.

"Did n't hear me ask for more, did you? No, an' you won't either. Me, I love a scrap, but I don't yearn for no encore after I've been clawed by a panther and chewed up by a threshing-machine and kicked by an able-bodied mule into the middle o' next week. Enough's a-plenty, as old Jim Butts said when his second wife died."

The prizefighter looked vindictively down at him. He was not satisfied, though he had given the range-rider such a whaling as few men could stand up and take. For the conviction was sifting

home to him that he had not beaten the man at all. His pile-driver blows had hammered down his body, but the spirit of him shone dauntless out of the gay, unconquerable eyes.

With a sullen oath Harrison turned away. His sulky glance fell upon Lennox, who was clapping his hands softly.

"You'd be one grand little fighter, Yeager, if you only knew how," the leading man said with enthusiasm.

"Mebbe you'd like to teach him, Mr. Lennox," sneered Harrison.

The star flushed. "Maybe I would, Mr. Harrison."

"Or perhaps you'd rather show him how it's done."

Lennox looked straight at him. "Nothing doing. And I serve notice right here that I'll have no more trouble with you. If it's got to come to that either you or I will quit the company."

The bully's eyes narrowed. "Which one of us?"

"It'll be up to Threewit to pass on that."

Harrison put on his coat and slouched sulkily out of the building. He knew quite well that if it came to a choice between him and Lennox the director would sacrifice him without a moment's consideration.

Farrar, who had been grinding out pictures since the beginning of hostilities, came forward to greet Yeager with a little whoop of joy.

"Say, you sure go some, Cactus Center. I never did see a fellow eat up such a licking and come up smiling. You're certainly one Mellin's Food baby. I'm for you — strong."

One of Steve's eyes was closing rapidly, but the other had not lost its twinkle.

"Does a fellow's system good to assimilate a tanning oncet in a while — sort o' corrects any mistaken notions he's liable to collect. Gentlemen, hush! Ain't Harrison the boss eat-'em-alive white hope that ever turkey-trotted down the pike?"

The melancholy Manderson smiled. "You make a hit with me, Arizona. If I were in your place I'd be waiting for the undertaker. You look like you'd out come of a railroad wreck, two fires, and a cattle stampede over your carcass. Here, boys, hustle along first aid to our friend the punching-bag."

They got him water and towels and a sponge. Steve, protesting humorously, submitted to their ministrations. He was grateful for the friendliness that prompted their kindness. The atmosphere had subtly changed. During the afternoon he had sensed a little aloofness, an intention on the part of the company members

to stand off until they knew him better. Now the ice was melted. They had taken him into the family. He had passed with honors his preliminary examination.

CHAPTER III

CHAD HARRISON

As soon as Steve stepped into the dining-room he knew that the story of his fight with Harrison had preceded him. His battered face became an immediate focus of curious veiled glances. These exhibited an animated interest rather than surprise.

Mrs. Seymour introduced him in turn to each of the other boarders, and the furtive looks stared for a moment their frank questions at him. As he drew in his chair beside a slender, tanned young woman, he knew with some amusement that his arrival had interrupted a conversation of which he had been the theme.

The film actress seated beside Yeager must have been in her very early twenties, but her pretty face, finely modeled, had the provocative effrontery that is the note of twentieth-century young womanhood. Its audacity, which was the quintessence of worldliness, held an alert been-through-it-all expression.

"I hope you like Los Robles, Mr. Yeager. Some of us don't, you know," she suggested.

"Like it fine, Miss Ellington," he answered

with enthusiasm, accepting from Ruth Seymour a platter of veal croquettes.

Daisy Ellington slanted mischievous eyes toward him. "Not much doing here. It's a dead little hole. You'll be bored to death — if you have n't been already."

"Me! I've found it right lively," retorted Steve, his eyes twinkling. "Had all the excitement I could stand for one day. You see I come from way back in the cow country, ma'am."

"And I came from New York," she sighed. "When it comes to little old Broadway I'm there with bells on. What d'you mean, cow country? Ain't this far enough off the map? Say, were you ever in New York?"

"Oncet. With a load of steers my boss was shipping to England. Lemme see. It was three years ago come next October."

"Three years ago. Why, that was when I was in the pony ballet with 'Adam, Eve, and the Apple.' Did you see the show?"

"Bet I did."

Her eyes sparkled. "I was in the first row, third from the left in the 'Good-Night' chorus. Some kick to that song, was n't there?"

"I should say yes. We're old friends, then, are n't we?" exclaimed Yeager promptly. He buried her little hand in his big brown paw, a

friendly smile beaming through the disfigurements of his bruised face.

"He did n't do a thing to you, did he?" she commented, looking him over frankly.

"Not a thing — except run me through a sausage-grinder, drop me out of one of these aeroplanes, hammer my haid with a pile-driver, and jounce me up and down on a big pile of sharp rocks. Outside of trifles like that I had it all my own way."

"I don't see any alfalfa in *your* hair," she laughed. Then, lowering her voice discreetly, she added: "Harrison's a brute. I'll tell you about him some time when Ruth is n't round."

"Ruth!" Steve glanced at the young girl who moved about the room with such rhythmic grace helping the Chinese waiter serve her mother's guests. "What has she got to do with Harrison?"

"Engaged to him — that's all. See that sparkler on her finger? Wouldn 't it give you a jolt that a nice little girl like her would take up with a stiff like Harrison?"

"What's her mother thinking about?" asked the cowpuncher under cover of the conversation that was humming briskly all around the tables.

Daisy lifted her shoulders in a careless little shrug. "Oh, her mother! What's she got to do with it? Harrison has hypnotized the kid, I

guess. He throws a big chest, and at that he ain't bad-looking. He's one man too, if he is a rotten bad lot."

The young woman breezed on to another subject in the light, inconsequent fashion she had, and presently deserted Yeager to meet the badinage of an extra sitting at an adjoining table.

After dinner Steve went to his new quarters to get a cigar he had left on the table. It was one Farrar had given him. He was cherishing it because his financial assets had become reduced to twenty cents and he did not happen to know when pay-day was.

Yeager climbed the barn stairs humming a range song:—

> "Black Jack Davy came a-riding along,
> Singing a song so gayly,
> He laughed and sang till the merry woods rang
> And he charmed the heart of a lady,
> And he charmed—"

Abruptly he pulled up in his stride and in his song. Ruth Seymour was in the room putting new sheets and pillow-cases on the bed.

"I have n't had time before. I did n't think you would be through dinner so soon," she explained in a voice soft and low.

"That's all right. I only dropped up to get a cigar I left on the table. Don't let me disturb you."

Her troubled eyes rested on the strong, lean face that went so well with the strong, lean body. One eye was swollen and almost shut. Red bruises glistened on the forehead and the cheeks. A bit of plaster stretched diagonally above the right cheekbone where the prizefighter's knuckles had cut a deep gash. Little ridges covered his countenance as if it had been a contour map of a mountainous country. But through all the havoc that had been wrought flashed his white teeth in a cheerful smile.

The girl's lip trembled. "I'm sorry you — were hurt."

He flashed a quick look at her. "Sho! Forget it, Miss Seymour. I was n't hurt any — none to speak of. It don't do a big husky like me any harm to be handed a licking."

"You — hit him first, did n't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, — knocked him out cold before he knew where he was at. He was entitled to a come-back. I'm noways hos-tile to him because he's a better man than I am."

She stood with the pillow in her hands, shy as a fawn, but with a certain resolution, too, the trouble of her soul still reflected on the sweet face.

"Why do men — do such things?" she asked with a catch of her breath.

He scratched his curly head in apologetic

perplexity. "Search me. I reckon the cave man is lurking around in most of us. We had n't ought to. That's a fact."

"It was all a mistake, Miss Ellington says. You thought he was hurting Miss Winters. Why did n't you tell him you were sorry? Then it would have been all right."

The cowpuncher did not bat an eye at this innocent suggestion.

"That's right. Why did n't I think of that? Then of course he would have laid off o' me."

"He — Mr. Harrison — is quick-tempered. I suppose all brave men are. But he's generous, too. If you had explained —"

"I reckon you're right. He sure is generous, even in the whalings he gives. But don't worry about me. I'm all right, and much obliged for your kindness in asking."

Steve found his cigar and retired. He carried with him in memory a picture of a troubled young creature with soft, tender eyes gleaming starlike from beneath waves of dark hair.

Yeager met Harrison swaggering up the gravel walk toward the house. A malevolent gleam lit in the cold black eyes of the bully.

"How you feeling, young fella?"

"A hundred and eighty years old," answered the cowpuncher promptly with a grin. "Every time I open my mouth my face cracks. You

ce'tainly did give me a proper trimming. I don't know sic-'em about this scientific fight game."

Harrison scowled. "There's more at the same address any time you need it."

"Not if I see you coming in time to make a getaway," retorted Steve with a laugh.

As the range-rider passed lightly down the walk there drifted back to the prizefighter the words of a cowboy song: —

> "Oh, bury me out on the lone prairee,
> In a narrow grave just six by three,
> Where the wild coyotes will howl o'er me—
> Oh, bury me out on the lone prairee."

Harrison ripped out an oath. There was a note of gentle irony about the minor strain of the song that he resented. He had given this youth the thrashing of his life, but he had apparently left his spirit quite uncrushed. What he liked was to have men walk in fear of him.

The song presently died on the lips of Steve. Harrison was on his way to call on Ruth. The man had somehow won her promise to marry him. It was impossible for Yeager to believe that the child knew what she was doing. To think of her as the future wife of Chad Harrison moved him to resentment at life's satiric

paradoxes. To give this sweet young innocent to such a man was to mate a lamb with a tiger or a wolf. The outrage of it cried to Heaven. What could her mother be thinking of to allow such a wanton sacrifice?

CHAPTER IV

THE EXTRA

From the first Yeager enjoyed his work with the Lunar Company. Young and full-blooded, he liked novelty and adventure, life in the open, new scenes and faces. As a film actor he did not have to seek sensations. They came to him unsought. He had the faculty of projecting himself with all his mind into the business of the moment, so that he soon knew what it was to be a noble and self-conscious hero as well as an unmitigated villain.

One day he was a miner making his last stand against a band of Mexican banditti, the next he was crawling through the mesquite to strike down an intrepid ranger who laughed at death. He fought desperate single combats, leaped from cliffs into space or across bridgeless chasms, took part in dozens of sets illustrating scenes of frontier life as Billy Threewit conceived these. Sometimes Steve smiled. The director's ideas had largely been absorbed in New York from reading Western fiction. But so long as he drew down his two-fifty a day and had plenty of fun doing it, Steve was no stickler for naked realism. The

"bad men" of Yeager's acquaintance had usually been quiet, soft-spoken citizens, notable chiefly for a certain chilliness of the eye and an efficient economy of expression that eliminated waste. Those that Threewit featured were of a different type. They strutted and bragged and made gun plays on every possible occasion.

Perhaps this was why Harrison's stuff got across. By nature a swaggering bully, he had only to turn loose his real impulses to register what the director wanted of a bad man. In the rough-and-tumble life he had led, it had been Yeager's business to know men. He made no mistake about Harrison. The fellow might be a loud-mouthed braggart; none the less he would go the limit. The man was game.

Lennox met Steve one day as the latter was returning from the property room with a saddle Threewit had asked him to adjust. The star stopped him good-naturedly.

"Care to put the gloves on with me some time, Yeager?"

The cowpuncher's face brightened. "I sure would. The boys say you're the best ever with the mitts."

"I'm a pretty good boxer, but I don't trail in your class as a fighter. What you need is to take some lessons. If you'd care to have me show you what I know —"

"Say, you've rung the bell first shot."

"Come up to the hotel to-night, then. No need advertising it. Harrison might pick another quarrel with you to show you what you don't know."

Steve laughed. "He's ce'tainly one tough citizen. He can look at a pine board so darned sultry it begins to smoke. All right. Be up there to-night, Mr. Lennox."

From that day the boxing lessons became a regular thing. The claim Lennox had made for himself had scarcely done him justice. He was one of the best amateur boxers in the West. In Yeager he had a pupil quick to learn. The extra was a perfect specimen physically, narrow of flank, broad of shoulder, with the well-packed muscles of one always trained to the minute. Fifteen years in the saddle had given him a toughness of fiber no city dweller could possibly equal. Nights under the multiple stars in the hills, cool, invigorating mornings with the pine-filled air strong as wine in his clean blood, long days of sunshine full of action, had all contributed to make him the young Hermes that he was. Cool and wary, supple as a wildcat, light as a dancing schoolgirl on his feet, he had the qualities which go to help both the fighter and the boxer. Lennox had never seen a man with more natural aptitude for the sport.

Sometimes Farrar was present at these lessons. Often Baldy Cummings, who liked the cowpuncher because Steve was always willing to help him get the properties ready for the required sets, would put on the gloves with him and try him out for a round or two. Manderson, the melancholy comedian, occasionally dropped in with some other member of the company.

The same thought was in the mind of all of them except Yeager himself. The extra was being trained to meet Harrison. It was apparent to all of them that the prizefighter was nursing a grudge. The jaunty insouciance of the young range-rider irritated him as a banderilla goads a bull in the ring.

"Steve gets under his hide. Some day he's going to break loose again," Farrar told Manderson as they watched Lennox and Yeager box.

"The kid shapes fine. If Mr. Chad Harrison waits long enough he's liable to find himself in trouble when he tackles that young tiger cub," answered the comedian. "Ever see anybody quicker on his feet? Reminds me of Jim Corbett when he was a youngster."

The news of the boxing lessons traveled to Harrison. He set his heavy jaw and waited. He intended that Yeager should go to the hospital after their next mix-up.

Meanwhile he found other causes for disliking

the new man. Always a vain man, his jealousy was inflamed because Steve was a better rider than he. At any time he was ready with a sneer for what he called the cowpuncher's "grandstanding."

"It gets across, Harrison," Threewit told him bluntly one day. "We've never had a rider whose work was so snappy. He's doing fine."

"Watch him blow up one of these days — nothing to him," growled the heavy.

"There's a whole lot to him," disagreed the producing director as he walked away to superintend the arrangement of a set.

Several days after this some new horses were added to the remuda of the Lunar Company. Harrison picked a young mustang to ride in a chase scene they were going to pull off. The pony was a wiry buckskin with powerful flanks and withers. The prizefighter was no sooner in the saddle than it developed that the animal had not been half broken. It took to pitching at once and presently spilled the rider.

Steve, sitting on the corral fence with Jackson and Orman, two other riders for the company, called across cheerfully,—

"Not hurt, are you?"

The heavy got up swearing. "Any of your damned business, is it?"

He caught at the pony bridle, jerked it

violently, and hammered the lifted head of the dancing mustang with his fist. After several attempts he succeeded in kicking its ribs. Yeager said nothing, but his eyes gleamed. In the cow country men interfere rarely when a vicious rider abuses his mount, but such a man soon finds himself under an unvoiced ban.

Harrison backed the mustang to a corner, swung to the saddle, and tugged savagely at the reins. Two minutes later he took the dust again. The horse had spent the interval in a choice variety of pitching that included sun-fishing, fence-rowing, and pile-driving.

To Jackson Steve made comment. "Most generally it don't pay to beat up a horse. A man's liable to get piled, and if he gets tromped on folks don't go into mourning."

Harrison could not hear the words, but he made a fair guess at their meaning. He turned toward Yeager with a snarl.

"Got anything to say out loud, young fella?"

"Only that any horse is likely to act that way when it gets its back up. I would n't ride a horse without any spirit."

"Think you can ride this one, mebbe?"

Without speaking Yeager slid down from the fence and approached the mustang. The animal backed away, muscles a-tremble and eyes full of fear. Steve's movements were slow, but not

doubtful. He stroked the pony's neck and gentled it. His low voice murmured soft words into the alert ear cocked back suspiciously. Then, without any haste or unevenness of motion, he swung up and dropped gently into the saddle.

For an instant the horse stood trembling. Yeager leaned forward and patted the neck of the colt softly. His soothing voice still comforted and reassured. Gradually its terror subsided.

"Open the gate," Steve called to Orman.

He rode out to the creosote flats and cantered down the road. A quarter of an hour later he swung from the saddle beside Threewit.

"Plumb gentle. You can make any horse a devil when you're one yourself."

They were standing in front of the stable. Threewit started to reply, but the words were taken out of his mouth. From out of the stable strode Harrison, a cold anger in his eyes.

"That's your opinion, is it?"

Yeager's light blue eyes met his steadily. "You've heard it."

"I've heard other things, too. You're taking boxing lessons. You're going to need them, my friend."

"The sooner the quicker," answered Steve evenly.

"You'll cut that out, both of you," ordered

Threewit curtly. "I'll fire you both if you don't behave."

"I'm no school-kid, Threewit. I play my own hand. Sabe?" Harrison turned his cold eyes on the range-rider. "And I serve notice right here that next time my young rube friend and me mixes you'd better bring a basket to gather up the pieces."

Yeager brushed a fly languidly from his gauntlet. "That's twice he's used the word 'friend.' I reckon he don't know I'm some particular who calls me that."

"That'll be enough, Yeager. Don't start anything here. We're a moving-picture outfit, not a bunch of pugs." Briskly the director changed the subject. "I want you to choose a couple of the boys and go down to Yarnell's after a herd of cattle we're going to need in that Tapidero Jim picture. If you need more help the old man will let you have one or two of his riders."

Harrison had turned to leave, but he stopped to examine the conchas on a pair of leathers. Steve had a fleeting thought that the man was listening; also that he was covering the fact with a manner of elaborate carelessness.

"Want I should start right away?"

"Yep. Can you get back by to-morrow night?"

"I reckon. Has Yarnell got 'em rounded up?" asked Yeager.

"He telephoned me this morning they were ready."

"Then we'd ought to reach Los Robles late to-morrow night if we hit the trail steady."

"Good enough. Who do you want to take with you?"

"I'll take Shorty and Orman."

The details were arranged on the spot. Harrison was still giving his attention to the conchas on the chaps. They were made of 'dobe dollars. He had seen Jackson wear them fifty times and had never before showed the least interest in them.

CHAPTER V

YEAGER ASKS ADVICE

THOUGH Yeager had enjoyed immensely his month with the Lunar people, he tasted again the dust of the drag-driver with a keen pleasure. He had not yet been able to get it out of his mind that he was only playing at work with the film company. When he heard some of the others complain about long hours and dangerous stunts he wished they could have ridden on the round-up for the Lone Star outfit about a week. Arizona had tanned the complexions of the actors, but it had left most of them still soft of muscle and fiber. The flabbiness of Broadway cannot be washed out of the soul in a month.

But to-day he felt he had done a man's work. It had been like old times. The white dust of the desert had enwrapped them in clouds. The untempered sun had beat down a palpitating heat upon dry sand wastes. The hill cattle he was driving were as wild as deer. A dozen times some lean steer had bolted and gone racing down a precipitous hillside like a rabbit. As often Four Bits had wheeled in its tracks and pounded through clutching cholla and down breakneck

inclines after the escaping three-year-old. Fierce cactus thorns had torn at the leather chaps as horse and rider had ripped through them, zig-zagging across the steep mountain slope at a gallop, the pony now slithering down the shale with braced forelegs, now taking washes and inclines with the surefooted litheness of a cat.

Now stars by millions roofed the velvet night. A big moon had climbed out of a crotch of the purple hills and poured a silvery light into a valley green and beautiful with the magic touch of spring. A grove of suhuaro rose like ghostly candelabra from the hillside opposite. The mesquite carried a wealth of dainty foliage. Even the flat-leafed prickly pear blended into the soft harmony of the mellow night.

Los Robles was still half a dozen miles away and the cattle were weary from the long drive. For an hour they had seemed to smell water and the leaders made a bee-line for it, bellowing with stretched necks as they hurried forward. It was late when at last they reached the waterhole.

"Time to throw off. We'll make camp in the cool of the morning," Yeager called to Shorty.

They built a fire of dead ironwood upon which they boiled coffee and fried bacon. Bread they had brought with them. After eating, they lay at ease and smoked.

There was little danger of the tired cattle

straying, but Yeager divided his party so that they should take turn about night-herding. He took the first watch himself.

The stillness of the desert night was a thing to wonder at. The silence of the great outdoors, of vast empty space, subdued the restlessness of the cattle. Many a time before the range-rider had felt the fascination of it creep into his blood as he had circled the sleeping herd murmuring softly a Spanish love-song. By day the desert was often a place of desolation and death, but under the mystic charm of night it was transformed to a panorama of soft loveliness.

He thought of many episodes in his short, turbid life. They flashed upon the screen of his memory as did the pictures of the Lunar Company upon the canvas. In his time he had mushed in Alaska, fought in Mexico, driven stage at the Nevada gold-fields, and wandered into many a lawless camp. Always he had answered the call of adventure regardless of where it led.

His thoughts were fugitive, inconsequent. Now they had to do with Daisy Ellington, the New York chorus girl whose mobile, piquant face was helping to make the Lunar reels popular. Steve was engaged in a whirlwind flirtation with her which both of them were enjoying extremely. He liked her slangy audacity, the frank

good-fellowship with which she had met him. Daisy was a good sport. She might pretend to sigh for the lights of Manhattan, but she was having a tremendously good time in Arizona.

"Reach for the roof, friend. No, I would n't rock the boat if I was you. Sit steady and don't move."

The words came to Yeager low but imperative. Automatically his hands went into the air even as he slewed his head to find out who was voicing the curt command. A rope dropped over his arms and was jerked tight just below the knees. Very cautiously a man emerged from behind a clump of cholla. The first thing he did was to remove the automatic revolver from the cow-puncher's chaps, the second to wind the rope tightly around his legs.

Steve made no comment, asked no questions. He knew that he would find out all about it in time. Just now he was not running the show.

"I expect your arms must be tired grabbin' at the stars. Drop 'em down close to your sides. That's fine. Lucky you did n't start anything coarse, my friend."

The man gave a low whistle, evidently a signal, then moved for the first time within range of his prisoner's eyes. He was masked and wore a soft black hat pulled well down over his fore-

head. A Mexican serape had been flung carelessly across his well-built shoulders.

Adroitly he bound Yeager's arms to his side by winding the rope round and round his body, after which he knotted it tightly several times at a point just between the shoulder blades.

The range-rider observed that he was a heavy-set, powerful man of about his own height. He wore plain shiny leather chaps and the usual high-heeled boots of a cowpuncher.

Presently three other men appeared out of the darkness, bringing with them Orman and Shorty, both of whom, wakened out of a sound sleep, were plainly surprised and disturbed.

Shorty was protesting plaintively. "This here ain't no way to treat a man. I ain't done nothin'. There ain't no occasion whatever for a gun play. What d' you want, anyhow? I'm no bad hombre. And me sleepin' so peaceable, too, when you shoved the hardware into my pantry, doggone it."

The three men in charge of Yeager's assistants were also masked. One of them in particular drew Steve's eyes. He was a slight, short person with the walk and bearing of a youth. He wore for a mask a red bandanna handkerchief with figures, into which holes had been cut for the eyes. The other two were Mexicans.

The heavy-set man drew them aside and gave

orders in a low voice. What these were Yeager could not hear, but from the gesturing he judged the leader of the band was giving explicit directions which he expected to be obeyed to the letter. After tying up Shorty and Yeager, the Mexicans and the younger man disappeared. The steady bawling of cattle that began shortly after told what they were doing. The herd was being moved slowly toward the south from its bedding-ground.

Already Steve had suspected the true state of affairs. He needed nobody to tell him now that the cattle were to be driven across the line into Sonora to supply some of the guerilla insurgents operating in the wilds of that state. Once they were safe in Mexico the cattle would be sold to old Pasquale for a fraction of their real value, the money received in exchange for them having been wrung by that old ruffian from some prisoner he had put to the torture to give up his honest earnings.

The man who had stayed to watch Yeager and his riders finished one cigar and lit another. He held to a somber silence, smoking moodily, a vigilant eye on his prisoners. Two or three times he looked at his watch impatiently. It must have been close to midnight when he rose as if to go.

"I'm going back into the bushes," he an-

nounced. "If any of you fellas make a move to free yourself inside of half an hour I'll guarantee you die of lead poisoning sudden."

They heard him moving away in the mesquite.

Shorty swore softly. "What d' you know about this? Me, I've had buck-ague for most three hours expecting that doggoned holdup to blow the roof of my head off. I don't sabe his game, unless he's on the rustle."

"Hell! He's runnin' these cows into Sonora. It don't take any wiz to guess that," answered Orman.

Steve was already busy trying to free himself. He gave no credit to the man's assertion that they would be watched from the bushes. The leader of the rustlers was already half a mile away, lengthening the distance between them at every stride of his galloping horse. The range-rider knew that their horses had probably been driven away, but he knew, too, that if Four Bits was within hearing of his whistle he could be depended upon to answer.

The cowpuncher had offered no resistance to being tied except a passive one. He had kept his chest expanded as much as possible when the ropes had been tightened and he had braced the muscles of his arm against the pressure of the folds. Ten minutes of steady work released one arm. The rest was a matter of a few moments.

With his knife he slashed the ropes that bound Shorty and Orman.

Already his whistle had brought an answer from Four Bits. Five minutes later Steve was astride the barebacked horse galloping across country toward Los Robles. His friends he had left to follow on foot as best they could. He had a very particular reason why he wanted to reach the hotel as soon as possible. A suspicion had bitten into his mind. He wanted to verify or dismiss it.

An hour later Four Bits pounded down the main street of Los Robles. Almost simultaneously Yeager brought the horse slithering to a halt and with one lithe swing of his body landed on the ground in front of the hotel porch. He ran up the steps and into the lobby. Behind his cage the night clerk was drowsing.

"Anybody come into the hotel the last thirty minutes?" Yeager asked sharply.

The clerk thought. "No, I reckon not. There was Mr. Simmons — but that was most an hour since."

"Nobody else?"

"No. Why?"

The range-rider turned to the stairs, took them three at a time, and followed the corridor to Room 217. He hammered on the door with his fist.

A sleepy voice wanted to know who was there.

"It's Steve Yeager, Mr. Threewit. I wanta see you."

"You've got all to-morrow to see me in, haven't you?"

"My business won't wait."

Grumbling, the producing director got up. Presently he opened the door and stood revealed in a dressing-gown over his pajamas.

"What do you want, my anxious friend?"

"We've been held up."

"Held up!" A slow grin spread over Threewit's fat good-natured face. "Well, I'll bet Mr. Holdup did n't get a mint off you lads."

"He did n't bother with us. It was the cattle he wanted. They've driven them across the line. At least, I reckon so."

Threewit woke up instantly. "That's different. Unload your story, Yeager."

The extra told it in six sentences.

"Of course you did n't know any of the holdups. They were masked, you say?"

"Yep." Steve's cool, steady eyes held those of the director. "But I've got a fool notion just the same that I do know one of them. Come with me to Harrison's room."

"But —"

"I'll do all the talking. Come along."

"Now, see here, Yeager. Just because you and Harrison are at outs —"

"Have I made any charges against him? Maybe I want to ask his advice. Maybe he could help us straighten out this thing. Got to pull together, have n't we?" A cynical light in the eyes of the young man contradicted his words.

Reluctantly the director followed the extra to the room of the heavy on the third floor. Yeager knocked. He rapped again, and a third time.

Drowsily a voice demanded what was wanted. Presently the door was flung open and Harrison stood blinking in the doorway, heavy-eyed and slumberous.

"What's the row?" he growled, scowling at Yeager.

"We were held up on the way from Yarnell's by rustlers. They drove the cattle away and left us tied up."

"That any reason why you should wake me in the middle of the night? I ain't got your cattle under the bed." The heavy jaw of the prize-fighter stood out saliently. Unconsciously his figure had drooped to the crouch of defense. His small black eyes were wary and defiant.

The cowpuncher laughed, lightly and easily. "I'm only a kid. Mr. Threewit comes from the

East and don't know anything about this rustling game. We thought of you right away."

"What do you mean you thought of me?"

Yeager's eyes were innocent and steady. "Why, o' course we came to you for advice — to ask you what we'd better do."

"Oh! That's it, eh?" Was there the faintest flitter of relief on the lowering face? Steve could not be sure. "Well, I'll dress and join you downstairs, Mr. Threewit. With you in a minute."

"We got no time to lose. Mind if we talk here, Harrison?" Without waiting for permission the extra pushed into the room and began his story. "Must 'a' been about six miles back that we threw off the trail and camped. I figured on getting in early in the forenoon. Well, I was night-herding when I got orders to punch a hole in the atmosphere with my fists. I did n't do a thing but reach for the sky. A big masked guy come out from the mesquite and helped himself to my gun. Then he tied me up."

"Would you know him again if you saw him?" interrupted the prizefighter harshly.

The gaze of Yeager met his blandly. There was the least possible pause, and with it a certain tension. The younger man smiled. "Why, how could I, seeing he was masked? He was a big sulky brute. I've a notion I'd know his voice again if I heard it, though."

"Think so?" In Harrison's voice was a jeer, derision in the half-shuttered eyes that watched the other man vigilantly.

"His hair was about the same color as yours," added Steve in a matter-of-fact voice.

The underhung jaw of the prizefighter shot out. "Meaning anything particular?"

"Why, no," replied Steve in amiable surprise. "What could I mean?"

"How do I know what every buzzard-head's got in his cocoanut?"

Steve continued his story, giving fuller details. His casual glances wandered about the room. They found no mask, no Mexican serape, no black felt hat. Since he had not expected to see these in plain view he was not disappointed. A belt with a scabbarded revolver lay on the table. The extra wondered whether it was the same weapon that had been pressed against the back of his neck a few hours earlier. The boots lying half under the bed were white with the dust of travel, but this was nothing unusual.

"You can have my advice gratis if you want it." Harrison addressed himself pointedly to Threewit. "Send back to old man Yarnell's and you'll find the cattle straying in about day after to-morrow."

"But, if rustlers took them —"

The big man laughed unpleasantly. "Forget

it, Mr. Threewit. A fairy tale to explain how-come your faithful cowboys to drap asleep and let the bunch stray. I reckon a little too much redeye in camp is the c'rect explanation."

Yeager smiled, saying nothing.

"And now I'm going to beat it for the hay again, Mr. Threewit. If you recollect, I told you some one was going to blow up pretty soon. Good-night."

As they walked back down the corridor Steve asked one question of the director. "Did it strike you he was a leetle too sleepy at first and just a leetle too quick to get that chip on his shoulder?"

"No, it did n't," snapped Threewit. Nobody likes to be dragged out of bed at two A.M., to hear bad news, and the director was merely human. "It makes me tired the way you two fellows shoot off about each other."

"He's a pretty slick proposition," Yeager went on, unmoved. "He hit the high spots back to town so as to have his alibi ready — did n't leave any evidence floating around loose in his room. He must have come up the back way so as to slip in without being noticed by the night clerk. At that he could n't have reached here more than a few minutes before me."

"Quite a Sherlock Holmes, are n't you?"

"Bet you a week's salary that if we go out to

the stables we find one of the horses still wet with sweat from a long run."

"Go you once," retorted Threewit promptly. "Wait just a jiffy till I get more clothes on."

Steve's prediction was verified. White Stockings, one of the fastest mounts in the remuda of the company, had been brought in from a long hard run within the past half-hour. Its flanks were stained with sweat and the marks of the saddle chafed its still moist back.

"You win," admitted Threewit. "But that does n't prove Harrison was on its back."

"No. Say, what about giving me a week off, Mr. Threewit?"

"What for?"

"I've just taken a notion to travel some. Mebbe I might run acrost those cattle that strayed back to Yarnell's whilst I was sleeping."

The director looked at him sharply. "All right. Go to it, son."

CHAPTER VI

PLUCKING A PIGEON

STEVE slept almost around the clock. He lost breakfast, but was there promptly for luncheon with the appetite of a harvest hand. During the two days' drive he had missed the good home cooking of Mrs. Seymour and he intended to make up for it.

Orman and Shorty had reached town some time about daylight and had spread the story of the holdup, so that the dining-room was humming with excitement. A dozen questions were flung at Steve before he had well taken his seat. He threw up his hands in surrender.

Before he had finished telling his edited story, Shorty drifted in and divided the interest. The little extra promptly took the stage away from Yeager, whereupon Daisy Ellington absorbed the attention of Steve. She asked a sharp question or two which he answered blandly. It was not his intention to communicate any suspicions he happened to have.

They were waiting for the dessert. Daisy put her lean, pretty elbows on the table and her chin in her little doubled fists. A provocative

audacity was in the tilted smile she flashed at him.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Breeze on, Steve. You're doin' fine. Next scene."

"That's all."

"Say, do I look like I was born yesterday? See any green in my eye, Cactus Center?"

He grinned. "You're sure wise, compadre. But the rest is mostly suspicions."

"I'm listening," she nodded.

"You're such a Sherlock Holmes I'd hate to go out with the boys if I was married to you."

"I'm your friend and would n't wish any such bad luck on you," she countered gayly. Then, in a lower voice, with a sudden gravity: "Is it Harrison, Steve?"

Amazement sparkled for a moment in his eyes. "With your imagination, Daisy,—" he was beginning when she cut him short.

"You gotta tell me what's on your chest, you transparent kid."

He knew she could keep a secret like a well. Looking round guardedly, his voice fell to a whisper. "If I'd reached town ten minutes earlier I'd 'a' beat him in and showed him up. Threewit won't hear to it, of course, but the

man that held me up was Chad Harrison. Take it or leave it. Just the same it's a fact."

Daisy nodded rapidly several times. "I take it, Steve. Always did know there was something shady about the big stiff. And I'll tell you something else you don't know. It's through that wild young colt brother of hers that he's got a strangle hold on Ruth."

Yeager set his lips to a noiseless whistle. "You mean —?"

She flung his question aside with an impatient wave of her hand. "I can't tell you what I mean. I've got no evidence. But it's true. She's ridiculously fond of that young scamp Phil. Somehow — in some way — Harrison has got the whip hand over him."

His eyes fell on the slender girl waiting on the table at the other end of the room. Her look met his. It almost seemed as if she knew they had been talking about her, for the milky cheek took on a shell-pink tinge. The long lashes fluttered down and she busied herself at once about her work.

"If she was my sister —"

Daisy did not need a completed sentence to understand his meaning. "Can you beat it?" she asked with a shrug. "Any gink that knows enough to come in out of the rain could tell that Chad Harrison is a bad egg. Give him the once over and you can see that."

After Ruth had arranged the tables for dinner she stole out to the porch for a breath of fresh air. Already the approach of an Arizona summer was beginning to make itself felt during the middle of the day. Yeager sat beneath the wild cucumber vines pleating a horsehair hatband for Daisy Ellington.

Ruth liked this brown, lithe cowpuncher, all sinew and bone and muscle. His smile was so warm and friendly, his manner so boyish and yet so competent. To look into his kind, steady eyes was to know that he could be trusted.

She moved in his direction shyly, a touch of pink blooming in her soft cheeks. Ruth was charmingly unsure of herself. It was always easy to disturb her composure. Even a casual encounter with the slim, brown-faced range-rider was an adventure for her. Now her pansy eyes deepened in color with excitement, with the tremulous fear of what she was to learn.

"Mr. Yeager, I — wanted to ask you about — about the holdup."

"What about it, Miss Ruth?"

"Did you — know any of them?"

"How could I? They were masked." His eyes had taken on a film of wariness that blotted out for the moment their kindness.

"I did n't know — I thought, perhaps, —"

She tried a new start. "Did you say that three of them were Mexicans?"

"Two of them," he corrected.

There was the least quiver of her lip. "The others were — both big men, did n't you say?"

"I did n't say."

A footstep sounded on the crisp gravel walk. Steve looked up, in time to catch the flash of warning menace Harrison sent toward the girl.

"Mr. Yeager has been having a pipe-dream, Ruth. Don't wake him up," jeered the heavy.

Ruth fled unobtrusively and left the men alone.

"Hear you're going on a vacation," said Harrison gruffly.

"You've heard correct." Yeager pleated his hatband with steady fingers. His voice was even and placid.

Harrison looked him over with indolent insolence. "Some folks find this climate don't agree with them. Some folks find it better to drift out, casual-like, y' understand?"

"Yes?"

"I'm tellin' it to you straight."

"That you're going to leave? The Lunar Company will miss you," suggested the range-rider politely.

"Think you're darned clever, don't you? It's you that's leaving the company, Mr. Yeager."

"For a week."

"For good."

"Had n't heard of it. News to me," answered Steve lightly.

"I'm givin' you the tip. See?"

"Oncet I knew a fellow who lived to be 'most ninety minding his own business," observed the cowpuncher to the world in general as he held up and examined his work.

"It ain't considered safe to get gay with me. I'm liable to lam your head off," threatened the big man sullenly.

"And then again you're liable not to. I'm not freightin' with your outfit, Mr. Harrison. Kindly lay off of me and you'll find we get along fine."

Steve rose and passed on his way to the street. Harrison was in two minds whether to force an issue again with him, but something in the contour of that close-gripped jaw, in the gleam of the steady eyes, was more potent than the dull rage surging in him. He let the opportunity pass.

Four Bits carried Yeager away from Los Robles at a road gait. Horse and rider were taking the border trail. It led them through a desolate country of desert where the flat-leafed prickly pear and the occasional pudgy creosote were the chief forms of vegetable life. Now and again a swift might be seen basking on a rock or a

Gila monster motionless on the hillside. The ominous buzz of a rattler more than once made the pony sidestep. Mesa and flat and wash succeeded each other monotonously.

It was after sunset when they drew up at a feed corral in Arixico. Steve looked after his horse and sauntered down the little adobe street to a Chinese restaurant which ostentatiously announced itself as the "New York Cafe." This side of the business street was in the territory of Uncle Sam, the other half floated the Mexican flag. After he had eaten, the young man drifted across to one of the gambling-houses that invited the patronage of Americans and natives alike.

He found within the heterogeneous gathering usually to be observed in such a place. Vaqueros brushed shoulders with Chinese laundrymen, cowpunchers with soldiers, peons with cattlemen from Arizona and Texas. Here were miners and soldiers of fortune and plain tramps. More than one of the shining-eyed gamblers had a price upon his head. Several were outlaws. A score or more had taken part in the rapine and the pillage of the guerrilla warfare that has of late years been the curse of the country. It would have been hard in a day's travel to find an assembly where human life was held at less value.

Among these lawless, turbulent siftings of the

continent Yeager was very much at home. He merged inconspicuously into the picture, a quiet, brown-faced man with cool, alert eyes. Nobody paid the least attention to him. He might be a horse-thief or an honest cowpuncher. It was a matter of supreme indifference to those present. Experience in that outdoor frontier school which always keeps open session had taught them that a man lived longer here when he minded his own business.

Steve stood close to the bar. A prospector leaned against it and talked to an acquaintance while they drank their beer.

"This here's how I figure it," he was saying. "I had a little dough when I begun digging gopher holes in these here hills. Not much — say fifteen hundred, mebbe. I sure ain't got it now. Lost it in a hole in the ground. Well; I reckon I'll go on looking for it where I lost it."

Casually Yeager sauntered over to the roulette table. A fat man in duck trousers — he was the agent for a firm of rifle manufacturers, Steve learned later — was bucking the wheel hard. In front of him lay a pile of gold-pieces and several stacks of chips. He was very red in the face from excitement and cocktails. The range-rider put a half-dollar on the red and won. He let it ride, won again, and shifted the chips to the black. Once more the goddess of luck favored

him. He divided his pile. Half went on the red, the rest on the first number his eye caught. It happened to be seventeen. The croupier spun the wheel again. The ball whirled round, dipped down once or twice, and plumped into the compartment numbered seventeen.

"Enough's a-plenty. Here's where I cash in," announced Steve cheerfully.

He stuffed the bills carelessly into his pocket and strolled over to the faro table. Yeager had come on business, not for pleasure. He intended to play just enough to give a colorable reason for his presence.

His roving eye settled upon the poker table at the rear of the room. Five men were playing. Two were Mexicans, three white. Two of the Americans were dismissed from Steve's mind with a casual glance. They were negligible factors. The third had his back to the observer, but the figure had a slender, boyish trimness that spoke of youth. The Mexican sitting to his right was a square-built fellow of forty with a scar on the cheek running from mouth to ear. There was on his face a certain ugliness of expression, a furtive cruelty. That there was an understanding between him and the man opposite soon became apparent to Yeager. They cross-raised the boy, working together to mulct him of the pile of chips in front of him.

It was the Mexican who sat with his back to the wall that drew and held the cowpuncher's eye. He too was slender, not much past thirty, but with the youth long since stamped out of his face. Sleek and black, a dominant personality, he sat there warily as a rattlesnake, dark eyes gleaming from a masked, smiling countenance.

The boy was the pigeon, and it was the Mexicans that were plucking him. So much Steve learned within two minutes. He had cut his eye teeth at poker, and he saw at a glance that this was no game for a youngster. Quietly he moved a step or two closer along the wall. He observed the play without appearing to do so.

The tension of the game was relieved with casual conversation. The two negligibles, playing about even, contributed mostly to it. The bulky Mexican added his quota. The boy, a heavy loser, concealed his feelings under the bravado expected of a good sport.

They were playing jack pots with a stripped deck, the joker going as a fifth ace or to fill a straight or a flush. Several hands were dealt without any stayers. The slender Mexican was dealing when the sensation of the game was handed out.

One of the negligibles opened the pot. The bulky Mexican stayed.

In the slow, easy drawl of the Southwest the boy spoke. "Me, I reckon I'll have to tilt it. Got to protect your hand from these wolves, Dave." He pushed in a stack of blue chips.

The third American did not stay. It was now up to the dealer — his name, it appeared, was Ramon Culvera. After a moment's hesitation he measured a stack of blues by those the boy had put in the pot and added to it another pile of yellows. With a grunt of protest the older Mexican stayed. The man who had opened the pot dropped out.

"Enough's a-plenty. Me, I got no business trailing along with you hyenas," he explained.

"Different here," commented the boy. "My cards look good enough for another hike."

Culvera examined his hand carefully, met the raise, and picked up the deck.

The Mexican with the scar interposed. "But one moment, señor. Let us make it a good pot." He pushed in all the chips in front of him.

Yeager, standing against the wall, caught the swift flash of surprise in the eyes of the boy. He counted the chips of the Mexican and then his own. These he added to the small fortune in the center of the table.

"Call it. I'm fifty-three shy," he said in an even voice.

The range-rider knew without being told that

this hand had been dealt from a cold deck for the express purpose of cleaning out the boy. From the tenseness of the lithe body, which had become, as it were, a coiled spring, he knew that the lad's suspicions were stirring to life.

The greedy little eyes of Culvera fastened on the boy. He made his first mistake. "How much you play back, Pheelip?"

The youngster answered. "I said a hundred bucks. I've got fifty-three in the pot now. That leaves forty-seven."

Culvera's raise was forty-seven dollars. The big Mexican shrugged. "Too steep for Jesus Mendoza." He threw his cards into the discard.

The boy who had been called Philip laid his cards face down on the table in front of him.

"Call it," he announced hoarsely. His eyes were fastened steadily on the nimble brown fingers of the dealer.

"Cards?" asked Culvera with an indolent lift of his eyebrows.

Philip hesitated. He had the nine, ten, and jack of clubs, the queen of hearts, and the joker. This counted as a king-high straight. Steve, standing back and to one side of him, guessed the boy's dilemma. Should he stand pat on his straight or discard the heart and draw to his straight flush? Culvera's play had shown great strength and would probably beat the pat

hand. The lad took a chance and called for one card.

Culvera drew two. He left them lying on the table while he discarded leisurely.

"You're all in, Pheelip. It's a showdown. What you got?"

Philip had drawn the six of clubs. He spread his hand with a sweeping gesture. "All blue."

The Mexican shrugged. "Beats me unless I helped." He showed three eights, then faced the two cards he had drawn. The first was a king of diamonds, the second the fourth eight.

"Hard luck, Pheelip," he said, and all his teeth flashed in a friendly smile as he opened both arms to rake in the chips.

Philip sat silent, his mind seething with suspicions. Culvera had played his hand very strangely, unless — unless he had known that a fourth eight was waiting for him in the deck. The boy looked up, in time to catch a vanishing smile on the face of Mendoza.

"Just a moment, Ramon," he called sharply, covering the chips with his hands. "That play — it don't look good to me. A man don't play threes so strong as that."

Culvera still smiled blandly, though his eyes were very watchful. "Me, I have what you call a hunch, Pheelip."

Yeager took two steps forward. "You bet he

did. Cold deck, kid. The other one is in his right-hand coat pocket."

The suavity went out of Culvera's face as a light does from a blown candle. Snarling, he rose from his seat and faced the cowpuncher.

"Liar! Cabrone!" he hissed, reaching for his gun.

Already the revolver of Mendoza was flashing in the air.

Like a streak Steve's arm swept up. Twice his revolver sounded. There was a crash of breaking glass from the incandescent lights. Yeager flung himself against the table and drove it against Culvera who reeled back against the wall and dropped his weapon. The sound of more shots, of men dodging their way to safety, of a sharp cry followed by groans, had trodden so swiftly on the heels of the range-rider's action that when he turned a moment later he saw in the semi-darkness a smoke-filled room in the confusion of chaotic movement.

Philip stood close to him, a smoking .38 in his hand, while Mendoza, clutching at his chair for support, sank slowly to the ground.

Close to the boy's ear spoke Steve. "Beat it. Make your getaway through that door. Meet me at Johanson's corral."

The boy plunged through the doorway into the darkness outside. Toward the exit after him

backed the cowpuncher. Already scattered shots were being flung in his direction, but the dim light served him well. The last thing he saw before he vanished through the door was Culvera groping for his weapon.

CHAPTER VII

STEVE TELLS TOO MUCH TRUTH

YEAGER ducked into the night. From the door through which he had just come bullets spat aimlessly. He crouched as he ran, dodging in zigzag little rushes. Voices pursued him, fierce and threatening. Men poured from the gambling-house as seeds are squirted from a squeezed lemon.

Into a vacant lot behind a store Steve swerved, finding shelter among some empty drygoods boxes. He was none too soon, for as he sank to cover, the rush of feet padded down the sidewalk. Stealthily he crept to the fence, vaulted it lightly, and found a more secure hiding-place in the lumber yard beyond. From the top of a pile of two by fours he watched, every sense alert to catch any warning of danger.

Soon his pursuers returned in little groups to their interrupted games. Now that the first excitement of the chase was over, few of them wanted to risk a battle with desperate men in the dark. That was what the rurales and the rangers were for.

The cowpuncher slid down cautiously and

left the lumber yard by way of the alley in the rear. He followed a barb-wire fence which bounded a pasture, and at the next corner crossed the street warily into United States territory. By alleys and back ways his feet took him to Johanson's stable. Noiselessly he crept toward it from the rear. Some one was inside saddling a horse. So much he could gather from the sounds. Was it Phil? Or was it some one getting ready for the pursuit? He moved a step nearer. A stick cracked beneath his foot.

The man saddling the bronco whirled, revolver in hand. "Who is it?" demanded a tense voice.

"All right, Phil." Steve moved forward, breathing easier. "Glad you made it. We'd better light a shuck out of here. They'll stir up the rurales to get after us, I reckon."

Already he was busy saddling Four Bits.

"Do you . . . do you think I killed him?" jerked out the boy, a strangled sob of overstrained emotion in his throat.

"Don't know. He was asking for it, was n't he?" answered Yeager in a matter-of-fact voice. He did not intend by an expression of sympathy to aid in any breakdown here. That could come later when they had put many miles between them and Arixico.

They led their horses out of the stable and

swung to the saddles not a minute too soon. A man came running toward them.

"Hold on," he called. "Just a moment. I'm the sheriff. They say a man has been killed."

The fugitives put spurs to their broncos. The animals jumped to a canter. Over his shoulder Steve looked back. The sheriff was standing undecided. Before it penetrated his brain that these were the men he wanted they were out of range.

For a time they rode in silence except for the clicking of the hoofs. Yeager turned, his hand on the rump of his pony.

"Don't hear anything of them. We've made a clean getaway, looks like. But they'll keep the wires warm after us — if Mendoza is dead."

The boy broke down, sobbing. "My God, I could n't help it. What else could I do? He was shooting when I fired."

"Sure he was, but that won't help you if they take you back to Mexico. My advice is for you to get into a hole and draw it in after you, for a few days anyhow. Where do you live?"

"At Los Robles — when I'm at home."

"Then you *are* Phil Seymour?"

"Who told you?" flashed the boy.

"I board with your mother. I'm a rider for the Lunar Company."

"Then you know Chad Harrison. Chad will get me out of this. He'll fix it."

"How'll he fix it?" demanded Yeager bluntly. "Back there across the line they're going to call this by an ugly name — if Mendoza cashes in his checks. Harrison can't fix murder, can he?"

A film of hard wariness covered the eyes of the boy as he looked across in the darkness at the other man. "He's got friends," was the dry, non-committal answer that came to the range-rider after a moment's distinct pause.

Yeager asked no more questions. There had been a "No trespass" sign in Phil's manner. But as they rode silently toward Los Robles Steve's mind groped again with the problem of Harrison's relation to those in power across the border. Was the man tied up with old Pasquale? Or was he an agent of the Huerta Government? Just now the Federals had control of this part of the border. Did the boy mean that it was among them that Harrison had friends? It looked that way, and yet — The cowpuncher could not get it out of his head that the stolen cattle had been for old Pasquale. Huerta's lieutenants were too wary to stock their pantry from the United States in that fashion.

They rode into Los Robles in the first gray stirrings of dawn, long before anybody in the little town was afoot.

"Where are you going to hide? First place they'll look for you will be at home," suggested Yeager.

"There's a haystack out in the Lunar pastures. I'll lay low there. Tell Chad when you see him, and have Ruth fix me up something to eat."

They parted, each of them to get in what sleep was possible before day. When Steve was awakened by the sound of some one stirring in the next room it seemed as though he had been in bed only a few minutes.

He walked up to the hotel before breakfast and saw Harrison as the actor was going into the dining-room. The big man stopped in his tracks and shot out a heavy jaw at him.

"Thought you was giving our eyes a rest for a while," he growled.

Yeager declined to exchange compliments with him. "There's a friend of yours on the haystack in the pasture. He wants to see you soon as it's convenient."

The eyes of the pugilist narrowed. "Put a name to him."

"Phil Seymour."

"What's he doing here?" demanded Harrison blackly.

"Perhaps you'd better ask him." Steve turned on his heel and walked back to his boarding-house.

His arrival at the breakfast table was greeted with a chorus of exclamations. What was he doing back so soon? Had he got homesick? Had he run out of money already?

He let them worm out of him that he had ridden away and forgotten his purse and that upon discovering this he had come back for the supplies of war. They joked him unmercifully, even Daisy, — who was manifestly incredulous about his explanation, — and he accepted their hilarious repartee with the proper amount of sheepish resentment.

After the meal was over he lingered to see Ruth, who had just sat down to eat.

"Can I see you alone, Miss Ruth?"

She flashed a quick look at him, doubtful and apprehensive. "In the pergola, almost right away."

The girl reached the vine-draped entrance of the pergola shortly after Yeager. Manifestly her fears had been growing in the interval since he had left her.

"What is it?" And swift on the heels of that, "Is it about Phil?"

"Yes."

"He's in trouble . . . again?" she breathed.

He nodded assent. "The boy's out in the pasture. He wants you to send him breakfast."

The dread that was always lying banked in

the hearts of herself and her mother found voice. "What has he done now?"

The range-rider chose his words carefully. "There was some trouble — just across the border. He had to shoot . . . and a man fell."

Her face mirrored terror. "You mean . . . dead?"

"I don't know," he answered gravely.

"Tell me all about it, please, — the circumstances, everything."

"He will tell you himself. I'll just say this — the shooting was forced on him. He fired in self-defense."

She wrung her hands. "I knew . . . I knew something dreadful would happen. Mr. Harrison promised me — he said he would look out for Phil."

Steve looked her straight in the eyes. "Harrison's a crook. He's been using your love for Phil as a lever. It's up to you and the boy to shake him off."

A swift, upblazing anger leaped to her face. "How dare you say that! How dare you!"

His blue eyes met her dark, stormy ones quietly and steadily. "I'm telling you the truth. Can't you see he's been leading Phil into deviltry? You're afraid of him, afraid of his influence over the boy. That's why you knuckle down to him."

"I'm not afraid. He's Phil's friend. You're against him just because he — he —"

"Say it, Miss Ruth. Just because he gave me the whaling of my young life. Nothing to that, nothing a-tall. My system can absorb a licking without bearing a grudge. But he ain't on the level. 'Course you'll hate me for saying it, but some one's got to tell you."

"It's none of your business. I dare say it was you that was with Phil when he — when he — got into trouble."

"Yes."

"I thought so." A sob swelled up in her throat. "You come here and make trouble. I do hate you if you want to know."

With that she turned tempestuously and went flying back to the house.

Steve smiled ruefully. He did not know much about women, but he had read somewhere that they were capable of injustice. She had plenty of spirit, anyhow, for all that she looked so demure and shy.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEAVY GETS HIS TIME

THREEWIT came to Steve while Cummings was preparing the stage set for a dissolve.

"Wish you'd look over this scenario, Yeager. The old man sent it out to me to see if we can pull off the riding end of it. Scene twenty-seven is the sticker. Here's the idea: You've been thrown from your horse and your foot's caught in the stirrup. You draw your gat to shoot the bronch and it's bumped out of your hand as you're dragged over the rough ground. See? You save your life by wriggling your foot out of your boot. Can it be done without taking too many chances?"

The rider considered. "I reckon it could if a fellow's boot was fixed so he could slip his foot out at the right time. I'll take a whirl at it."

"There's another scene where you save Maisie by jumping from your horse to a wild steer that's pursuing her. You'll have to twist its head and throw the brute after you straddle it."

"All right. When you want to pull it off?"

"We can do the stirrup one to-day, before you go — if you still want to go."

"Got an answer yet from Arixico?"

"Just got it. Mendoza's still alive, but mighty badly hurt. I've sent the kid out to the animal farm. He'll lie low, and they won't find him there."

"I'm still curious about that bunch of cattle we lost. If you can spare me I'll run down and see if old Pasquale has n't got 'em. It ain't likely we'll ever get hide or hair of 'em, but there's one thing I'd like to find out."

"Still got that notion about Harrison?"

"Maybe I have. Maybe I have n't. Anyhow, folks that are blind can't see. I'll keep my notions in my own fool haid for a while."

"Harrison has some friends across the line. He's going to try and fix it for the kid if they run him down."

"That's fine," commented Yeager dryly. "He sure must have influential friends."

"All ready, Mr. Threewit," called out Cummings.

The director lit a cigar and moved forward to the stage. "Lennox, you're too far up stage. Register fear, Daisy. That's the idea. Now, then, Miss Winters. Keep your eyes on Daisy as you come into the room. No — no — no! That won't do at all."

Yeager left them to their rehearsal troubles and strolled back to his boarding-house. He would not be needed till afternoon.

He spent a half-hour softening the leather of his right boot around the ankle. A man cannot tumble from a running horse, let himself be dragged forty yards, and then slip his foot from the stirrup of a cowpony that has become frightened without taking a big chance. But it was his business to take chances. He always had taken them. And he knew that they could be minimized by careful preparation, expertness, and cool skill of execution.

As it turned out, Yeager had to make his fall twice. The ground selected for the set was a bit of level space just at the foot of a hillside. The rider went down hard on his shoulder at exactly the spot selected, but he had miscalculated slightly and the force of the fall dragged his foot from the boot at once. His calculations worked better at the second attempt. Hanging on by a toe-hold, he was dragged bumping over the rough ground. His revolver came out on schedule time and flew into the air. When Farrar gave the word, — which was at the moment the galloping horse was opposite the camera, — Steve worked his foot free, leaving the boot still clinging to the stirrup.

Yeager got to his feet rather unsteadily. The fall had been an unusually hard one, and it had not helped any to be dragged at full speed over the bumpy ground. Maisie Winters ran forward

and slipped an arm around his waist to support him.

"You dandy man! I never did see one so game as you, Steve."

The cowpuncher grinned. He liked Maisie Winters. There was about her a boyish, slangy camaraderie that made for popularity.

"Says the extra to the star, 'Much obliged, ma'am.'"

"You're no extra. In your own line you're as big a star as we've got. I know there is n't a rider in the country like you. You're a jim-dandy."

"He's quite a family pet," contributed Harrison sourly.

Farrar came forward from the camera, his eyes shining. "Some picture, I'll bet. Good boy! You pulled it fine, Steve. Did n't he, Threewit?"

The director nodded. He was wondering how much he would have to raise this young man's salary to hold him from rival companies.

"Sho! I just fell out of the saddle, Frank. Most any one can fall off a horse."

Harrison laughed spitefully. "I saw him do a better fall than that oncet."

Farrar was on the spot. "I saw you do a mighty good one the same day."

"Don't get fresh, young fella, or you'll do more than see one," snarled the heavy.

"Want to beat me up, Chad?" asked Farrar with innocent impudence. "I weigh one hundred and thirty-one pounds when I'm hog fat. How much do you weigh?"

"Cut it out, Frank," ordered Threewit. "I've had about enough of this jangling. If it is n't stopped, some one's going to lose a job. We're here to take pictures. Any one who's got any other idea had better call at the office for his time."

"Meaning me, Mr. Director?" demanded Harrison menacingly.

"Meaning you or anybody else that won't keep the rules I set for the company I run," retorted the director sharply.

"Forget it, Threewit. I'm no kid. Nobody runs me with rules. I do as I please."

"You'll not make trouble in my company."

"You ain't any little tin god on wheels. Don't run away with that idee in your bean. I have n't seen any man yet that can lay onto me without getting his hair curled for him. Me, I play my own hand, by God; and I don't care whether it's against Mr. Yeager or Mr. Farrar — or Mr. Threewit. See?"

"Your pay is waiting for you, Harrison."

"What? How's that?" he snarled.

"You're discharged — no longer working for the Lunar Company."

Harrison's face became an apoplectic purple. He stood with clenched fists glaring at the director, ready to explode with rage. It was a part of his vanity that he had not supposed for an instant that Threewit would let him go.

But it happened that the director had a temper of his own. He had chafed long enough under the domineering ways of the ex-prizefighter. Moreover, Harrison was no longer so essential to the company. Yeager was a far better rider and could register more effectively the feats of horsemanship that were a feature of the Lunar films. Billie Threewit had known for some time that this man was an element of disorganization in the company. Therefore he was letting him go.

Steve stood quietly in the background, one arm thrown carelessly across the neck of his pony. But his gaze did not lift from the heavy, who stood glaring at the director, his fingers working and head thrust low on the deep chest so that the gorilla hunch was emphasized. The man's black eyes snapped with a blazing fire that seemed ready to leap like a crouched tiger.

"Through with me, are you? Going to use that grand-stander Yeager instead, I reckon. That's the game, is it?"

"I'm not discussing my plans with you."

"Ain't you? Well, I'll discuss mine to this extent. I'll make you sick of this day's work all

right before I'm through with you. Get that? Plumb sick." His eyes traveled around the half-circle till they met those of Yeager. "You'll get yours too, my friend. Believe *me*. Get it a-plenty. You're going to sweat blood when I git you hog-tied."

He turned away, flung himself on his horse, and dug the rowels into the sides of the animal savagely.

Farrar laughed nervously. "Exit Mr. Chad Harrison, some annoyed."

Steve looked gravely at his employer. "Sorry you tied that can on him, Mr. Threewit. He's not just the man I'd choose for an enemy if I was picking one."

"Had to do it sometime. The sooner the quicker. Anyhow, he has n't got it in for me as much as he has for you."

Yeager shrugged. "Oh, me. That's different. 'Course he hates me thorough, but I'm sorry you got mixed in it."

"What difference does it make? He can't hurt me any." The director clapped his hands briskly. "All over at the willows for the kid-finding scene. Got your location picked, Farrar?"

CHAPTER IX

GABRIEL PASQUALE

A RED-HOT cannon ball was flaming high in the heavens when Yeager drew out of Los Robles at a road gait. The desert winds were whispering good-night to the sun as he crossed Dry Sandy just above the Sinks. Many dusty miles in Sonora had been clipped off by Four Bits before the chill moon rose above the black line of the distant hills and flooded a transformed land with magical light, touching a parched and arid earth to a vibrant and mysterious beauty of whispering yucca and fantastic cactus and weird outline of mesquite.

Twice he unsaddled the bronco, hobbled it, and lay on his back with his face to the million stars of night. The first time he gave Four Bits an hour's rest and grazing. It was midnight when he dismounted at a water-hole gone almost dry under many summer suns. Here he slept the heavy, restful sleep of healthy, fatigued youth, arms and legs sprawling, serene and peaceful, unmoving as a lifeless log.

With the first faint streaks of dawn that came flooding into the eastern sky he was afoot, knock-

ing together such breakfast as a rider of the plains needs. Presently he was once more in the saddle, pushing across the tawny, empty desert toward the hills that hid Noche Buena, the village where Pasquale had his headquarters.

The smell of breakfast and the smoke of it were in the air when he rode into the street lined with brown adobe huts. The guards paid no attention to him. Gringos evidently were no unusual sight to the troopers of the insurgent chief. Most of these were wearing blue denim suits of overall stuff, though a few were clad in khaki. All carried bright-colored handkerchiefs around their necks. Serapes, faded and bright, of all hues and textures, were in evidence everywhere.

He stopped a boy in riding-boots reaching to his hips, down the sides of which were conchas of silver dollars. Like most of those in camp the face upturned to that of Yeager was of a strong Indian cast.

The American inquired where the general might be found.

The boy — Steve judged him not over fifteen, and he was to find many soldiers in camp younger even than this — pointed to a square two-story house near the center of the town.

Two sentries were on guard outside. One of these went inside with the message of Yeager.

Presently he returned, relieved the American of his revolver, and announced that the general would see him.

Pasquale was at breakfast with one of his lieutenants, a slender young man with black sleek hair who sat with his back to the door. From the first moment that his eyes fell upon that lithe, graceful figure the American knew that presently he would be looking into the face of Ramon Culvera. A chill shudder passed through him for an instant. If the gambler recognized him he was lost.

But as yet Culvera had not taken the trouble to turn. He was eating a banana indolently and stray Gringos did not greatly interest him.

"You want to see me, señor," demanded Pasquale in Spanish.

"I'm out of a job — thought maybe you could give me something to do. I met Tom Neal. He figured you might."

"In the army? Do you want to fight?"

Pasquale leaned back in his chair and looked at his guest from narrowed eyes that expressed intelligent energy and brutality. He was smiling, but there was something menacing even about his smile. It struck Steve that he was as simple, as natural, and about as humane as a wolf. He was not tall, but there was unusual breadth and depth to his shoulders. Something

of the Indian was in the high cheekbones of his rough, unshaven, coffee-colored face. The old ruffian looked what he was, a terrible man, one who could brush out a human life as lightly as he did the ash from his cigar.

"I don't know. Perhaps. Can you give me a commission?"

"Hmp!" The beadlike eyes of the bandit took in shrewdly the competence of this quiet, brown-faced man. He might be a thief and a murderer, — very likely was since he had crossed the border to join the insurgents, — but it was a safe bet that he had the fighting edge. Men of this particular stripe were needed to lick his tattered, nondescript recruits into shape. "Where you from? Who knows you?"

Culvera slewed round in his seat and glanced at the man standing behind his chair. The indifference did not fade out of his eyes.

"I've been with the Lunar Film Company. Before that I was riding for the Lone Star cattle outfit," answered Yeager.

The younger Mexican showed a flicker of interest. "The Lunar Film Company? Do you know a man named Harrison, señor?"

"Yes."

"And a boy named Pheelip Seymour?"

"I've just met him. He does n't work for the company."

Culvera turned to his chief. "It is this Pheelip that shot Mendoza, he and another Gringo."

Pasquale nodded, still watching Yeager.

"Know any military tactics?" he asked.

"None — except to hit the other fellow first and hit him hardest."

"And to hit him when he is n't looking. Those three things are all there is to know about war — those three, and to keep your men fat." Pasquale's momentary grin faded. "I'll give you a try-out for a week. If we like each other we'll talk turkey about a commission. Eh, señor?"

"Go you one. If we ain't suited we part company at the end of a week."

The noted insurgent leader spoke English as well as he did Spanish. Sometimes he talked in one language, sometimes in the other. Now he relapsed into Spanish and asked Yeager to join them at breakfast.

The cowpuncher sat down promptly. It had been three hours since he had eaten lightly and he was as hungry as a Yukon husky. He observed that Culvera's table manners were nice and particular, whereas those of his chief, though they ate off silver taken from the home of a Federal supporter during a raid, were uncouth in the extreme. He wolfed his food, throwing it into his mouth from knife or fork as rapidly as he could.

Glancing up from his steak, Steve observed

the brooding eye of Culvera upon him. Faint suspicions, recollections too vague as yet for definiteness, were beginning to stir in the mind of the man. He had taken on the look of wariness, masked by a surface smile, that his face had worn the night of the shooting.

Yeager's talk flowed on, easy, careless, unperturbed. His stories were amusing Pasquale, and the old ruffian had a fondness for anybody that could entertain him. But back of his debonair gayety Steve nursed a growing unease. He was no longer dressed in the outfit of a cowpuncher, but wore a gray street suit and a Panama straw hat. Culvera had caught only a momentary glance at him the night they had faced each other revolver in hand. Yet the American was morally convinced that given time recognition would flash upon the young Mexican. Some gesture or expression would betray him. Then the fat would be in the fire. And Steve — where would he be?

After breakfast Yeager rode out with Pasquale to review the troops. It was an entirely informal proceeding. The youthful army was happily engaged in loafing and in play. A bugle blew. There was an instant scurry for horses. They swung into line, stood at attention, and at a second blast charged yelling across the plain, serapes flying wild.

Pasquale turned to Yeager with a gesture of his hand. "They are mine, body and soul. They eat, sleep, starve, and die at my word. Is it not so?"

The charging line had wheeled and was coming back like the distant roll of thunder. "Viva Pasquale!" they shouted as they galloped. Steve had a momentary qualm lest they charge over him and their chief, but the tough little horses were dragged to a halt five yards from them in a great cloud of dust. Bullets zipped into the air in their wild enthusiasm. Wild whoops and cheers increased the tumult.

"Looks that way," agreed the American.

Returning to the village, Steve observed a bunch of cattle a hundred yards from the trail. A Mexican lad, half asleep, was herding them. Immediately a devouring curiosity took hold of the cowpuncher. He wanted to see the brand on those cattle. It struck him that the shortest way was the quickest. He borrowed the field-glasses of Pasquale.

As he lowered the glasses after looking through them, Yeager laughed. "Funny how things come out. In this country cattle are like chips in a poker game. They ain't got any home, I reckon."

"Meaning, señor?" suggested the insurgent chief.

"Meaning that less than a week ago I paid a

perfectly good check of the Lunar Company for that bunch of steers. We did aim to use them in some roundup sets, but I expect you've got another use for them."

"Si, señor."

"Hope Harrison held you up for a good price," suggested the American casually.

Pasquale showed his teeth in a grin. "He was some anxious to unload in a hurry — had to take the market he could find handy."

"Looks like he was afraid the goods might spoil on his hands," Steve commented dryly.

"Maybeso. I did n't ask any questions and he did n't offer any explanations. Fifteen gold on the hoof was what I agreed to pay. Were you in on this with Harrison?"

"I was and I was n't. Me, I drove that bunch 'most forty miles, then he held me up and took the whole outfit from me."

Pasquale saw he had made a mistake and promptly lied. "It was n't Harrison I got them from at all — just wanted to see what you'd say."

"Well, they did n't cost me a red cent. You're welcome to 'em as far as I'm concerned. Slow elk suits me fine. I'll help you eat them while I'm here, and that will be a week anyhow."

"You're a good sport, Yeager, as you Gringos say. We'll get along like brothers. Not so?"

The revolutionary chief was an incessant card-

player. He had a greasy pack out as soon as they reached camp. Steve was invited to take a hand, also Ramon Culvera and a fat, bald-headed Mexican of fifty named Ochampa. Culvera, playing in luck, won largely from his chief, who accepted his run of ill fortune grouchily. Pasquale had been a peon in his youth, an outlaw for twenty years, and a czar for three. He was as much the subject of his own unbridled passions as is a spoiled and tyrannous child. Yeager, studying him, was careful to lose money with a laugh to the old despot and equally careful to see that the chips came back to him from Ochampa's side of the table.

The cowpuncher knew fairly well the political rumors that were afloat in regard to the situation in northern Mexico. Pasquale as yet was dictator of the revolutionary forces, but there had been talk to the effect that Ramon Culvera was only biding his time. Other ambitious men had aspired to supplant Pasquale. They had died sudden, violent deaths. Ramon had been a great favorite of the dictator, but it was claimed signs were not lacking to show that a rupture between them was near. Watching them now, Yeager could well believe that this might be true. Culvera was suave, adroit, deferential as he raked in his chief's gold, but the irritability of the older man needed only an excuse to blaze.

A blue-denim trooper came into the room and stood at attention.

Pasquale nodded curtly.

"Señor Harrison to see the general," said the private in Spanish.

A chill ran down the spine of the American. This was the last place in the world that he wanted to meet Chad Harrison. A swift vision of himself standing with his back to a wall before a firing line flashed into his brain.

But he was in for it now. He knew that the ex-prizefighter would denounce him. A dare-devil spirit of recklessness flooded up in his heart. A smile both gay and sardonic danced in his eyes. Thus does untimely mirth in the hour of danger drive away a sober, prayerful gravity from the mien of such light-hearted sons of nature as Stephen Yeager.

CHAPTER X

A NIGHT VISIT

HARRISON stood blinking in the doorway, having just come out from the untempered sunlight in the street. He shook hands with the general, with Culvera, and then his glance fell upon the American.

"Fine glad day, ain't it?" Yeager opened gayly. "Great the way friends meet in this little old world."

"What are you doing here?" demanded the prizefighter, his chin jutting forward and down.

"Me! I'm losing my wad at stud. Want to stake me?"

Harrison turned to Pasquale. "Know who he is? Know anything about him, general?"

"Only what he has told me, señor."

"And that is?"

"That he worked for the moving-picture company at Los Robles, that he is out of a job, and that he wants to try the revolutionary game, as you Americans say."

"Don't you believe it. Don't believe a word of it," broke out Harrison stormily. "He's a spy. That's what he is."

Smiling, Steve cut in. "What have I come to spy about, Harrison?"

"You told Threewit that you thought General Pasquale had those cattle. You may deny it, but —"

"Why *should* I deny it?" Yeager turned genially to the insurgent chief. "*You* don't deny it, do you, general?"

Pasquale laughed. He liked the cheek of this young man. "I deny nothing and I admit nothing." He swept his hand around in a gesture of indifference. "My vaqueros herd cattle I have bought. Possibly rustlers sold them to me. Maybeso. I ask no questions."

"Nor I," added Yeager promptly. "At least, not many. I eat the beef and find it good. You ought to have got a good price for a nice fat bunch like that, Harrison."

"What d' you mean by that?" The man's fists were clenched. The rage was mounting in him.

"Forget it, Harrison! You've quit the company. You're across the line and among friends. No use keeping up the bluff. I know who held me up. If I'm not hos-tile about it, you don't need to be."

The prizefighter flung at him the word of insult that no man in the fighting West brooks. Before Steve could speak or move, Pasquale hammered the table with his heavy, hairy fist.

"Maldito!" he roared. "Is it so you talk to my friends in my own house, Señor Harrison?"

The rustler, furious, turned on him. But even in his rage he knew better than to let his passion go. The insurgent chief was more dangerous than dynamite in a fire. Purple with anger, Harrison choked back the volcanic eruption.

"Friend! I tell you he's a spy, general. This man killed Mendoza. He's here to sell you out."

The sleek black head of Culvera swung quickly round till his black eyes met the blue ones of Yeager. He flung his hand straight out toward the Anglo-Saxon.

"Mil diablos! What a dolt I am. It's the very man, and I've been racking my brain to think where I met him before."

Yeager laughed hardily. "I've got a better memory, señor. Knew you the moment I set eyes on you, though it was some smoky when we last met."

Culvera rose, his knuckles pressing against the table. There was a faint smile of triumph, on his masked, immobile face.

"Farewell, Señor Yeager," he said softly. "After all, it's a world full of hardship and unpleasantness. You're well rid of it."

Steve knew his sole appeal lay in Pasquale. Ochampo was a nonentity. Both Harrison and

Culvera had already condemned him to death. He turned quietly to the insurgent leader.

"How about it, general? Do I get a pass to Kingdom Come — because I stood by a half-grown kid when two blacklegs were robbing him?"

"You shot Mendoza, eh?" demanded Pasquale, his heavy brows knit in a frown.

"No; I helped the boy escape who did."

"You were both employed by the enemy to murder him and Culvera — not so?"

"Nothing of the sort. Young Seymour was in a poker game with Culvera and Mendoza. They were cross-lifting him — and playing with a cold deck at that. I warned the kid. They began shooting. I could have killed either of them, but I blew out the lights instead. In self-defense the boy shot Mendoza. We escaped through the door. The trouble was none of our seeking."

Culvera shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands in a gesture of bland denial. "Lies! All lies, general. Have I not already told you the truth?"

Coldly Pasquale pronounced judgment. "What matter which one shot Mendoza. Both were firing. Both escaped together. Both are equally guilty." He clapped his hands. A trooper entered. "'Tonio, get a guard and take this man to prison. See that he is kept safe. To-morrow at dawn he will be shot."

The trooper withdrew. Pasquale continued evenly. "We have one rule, Señor Yeager. He who kills one of us is our enemy. If we capture him, that man dies. Fate has shaken the dice and they fall against you. So be it. You pay forfeit."

Yeager nodded. He wasted no breath in useless protest against the decision of this man of iron. What must be, must. A plea for mercy or for a reversal of judgment would be mere weakness.

"If that's the way you play the game there's no use hollering. I'll take my medicine, because I must. But I'll just take one little flyer of a guess at the future, general. If you don't put friend Culvera out of business, it will presently be, 'Good-night, Pasquale.' He's a right anxious and ambitious little lieutenant, I should n't wonder."

Harrison triumphed openly. He followed out of the house the file of soldiers who took his enemy away.

"Told you I'd git even a-plenty, did n't I?" he jeered. "Told you I'd make you sweat blood, Mister Yeager. Good enough. You'll see me in a box right off the stage to-morrow morning when the execution set is pulled off. Adios, my friend!"

The cowpuncher was thrust into a one-room, flat-roofed adobe hut. The door was locked and

a guard set outside. The prison had for furniture a three-legged stool and a rough, home-made table. In one corner lay a couple of blankets upon some straw to serve for a bed. The walls of the house, probably a hundred years old at least, were of plain, unplastered adobe. The fireplace was large, but one glance up the narrow chimney proved the futility of any hope of escape in that direction.

He was caught, like a rat in a trap. Yet somehow he did not feel as if it could be true that he was to be taken out at daybreak and shot. It must be some ridiculous joke Fate was playing on him. Something would turn up yet to save him.

But as the hours wore away the grim reality of his position came nearer home to him. He had only a few hours left. From his pocket he took a notebook and a pencil. It was possible that Pasquale would let him send a letter through to Threewit if it gave some natural explanation of his death, one that would relieve him of any responsibility. Steve tore out a page and wrote, standing under the little shaft of moonlight that poured through the small barred window: —

> Fifteen minutes ago [so he wrote] I accidentally shot myself while target-practicing here in camp. They say I won't live more than a few hours. By

the courtesy of General Pasquale I am getting a letter through to you, which is to be sent after my death. Give bearer ten dollars in gold.

Say good-bye for me to Frank, Daisy, and the rest. *Bust up that marriage if you can.*

Adios, my friend.

STEVE YEAGER.

He was searching in his pocket for an envelope when there came a sound that held him rigid. Some one was very carefully unlocking the door of his prison from the outside. Stealthily he drew back into the deep shadow at the farther end of the room, picking up noiselessly by one leg the stool by the table. It was possible that some one had been sent to murder him.

The grinding of the key ceased. Slowly the door opened inch by inch. A man's head was thrust through the opening. After a long time of silence a figure followed the head and the door was closed again.

"You may put down that weapon, Señor Yeager. I have not come to knife you."

The lower half of the man's face was covered by a fold of his serape, the upper part was shaded by his sombrero. Only the glittering eyes could be plainly seen.

"Why have you come?"

"To talk with you — perhaps to save you. Quien sabe?"

Yeager put down the stool and gave it a shove across the floor. "Will you take a seat, general? Sorry I can't offer you refreshments, but the truth is I'm not exactly master in my own house."

Pasquale dropped the serape from his face and moved forward. "So you knew me?"

"Yes."

"How much will you give for your life?" demanded the Mexican abruptly, sitting down on the stool with his back to the table.

"As much as any man."

The general eyed him narrowly. One sinewy brown hand caressed the butt of a revolver hanging at his hip.

"Who paid you to murder Culvera and Mendoza — not Farrugia, surely?" Pasquale shot at him, eyes gleaming under shaggy brows.

Garcia Farrugia was the Federal governor of the province, the general with whom Pasquale had been fighting for a year.

"No — not Farrugia."

The insurrecto chief, sprawling in the moonlight with his back against the table, nodded decisively.

"I thought as much. He's no fool. Garcia

knows it would not weaken me to lose both of them, that my grief would not be inconsolable. Who, then, if not Farrugia?"

"Nobody. I'm not an assassin. The story I told you is the truth, general."

"If that is true, Ramon Culvera's lies have brought you to your death."

The Mexican still sprawled with an arm flung across the table. Not a muscle of his lax body had grown more taut. But the eyes of the man — the terrible eyes that condemned men to their graves without a flicker of ruth — were fixed on the range-rider with a steady compulsion filled with hidden significance.

"Yes." Steve waited, alert and watchful. Presently he would understand what this grim, virile old scoundrel was driving at.

"You fought him in the open. You played your cards above the table. He comes back at you with a cold deck. Señor, do you love Ramon like a brother?"

"Of course not. If I could get at him before—"

The rigor of the black eyes boring into those of Yeager did not relax. The impact of them was like steel grinding on steel.

"Yes? If you could get at him? What, then, señor?"

The words were hissed across the room at the American. Pasquale was no longer lounging. He

leaned forward, body tense and rigid. His prisoner understood that an offer for his life was being made him. But what kind of an offer? Just what was he to do?

"Say it right out in plain United States talk, general. What is it you want me to do?"

"Would you kill Ramon Culvera — to save your own life?"

After barely an instant's hesitation Steve answered. "Yep. I'll fight him to a finish — any time, any place."

"Bueno! But there will be no risk for you. He will be summoned from his house to-night. You will stand in the darkness outside. One thrust of the knife and — you will be avenged. A saddled horse is waiting for you now in the cottonwood grove opposite. Before we get the pursuit started you will be lost in the darkness miles away."

The heart of Yeager sank. The thing he was being asked to do was plain murder. Even to save his own life he could not set his hand to such a contract.

"I can't do that, general. But I'll pick a quarrel with him. I'll take a chance on even terms."

"No — no!" Pasquale's voice was harsh and imperative. "The dog is plotting my murder. But first he wants to make sure he is strong enough to succeed me. So he waits. But I —

Gabriel Pasquale — I wait for no man's knife. I strike first — and sure. You execute the traitor and save your own life which is forfeit. Caramba! Are you afraid?"

"Not afraid, but —"

"You walk out of that door a free man. You give the password for to-night. It is 'Gabriel.' You settle with the traitor and then ride away to safety. Maldito! Why hesitate?"

"Because I'm a white man, general. We don't kill in the dark and run away. When I offer to fight him to a finish I go the limit — and then some. For I don't hate Culvera that bad. But I think a heap of Steve Yeager's life, so I'll stand pat on my proposition."

"Am I a fool, señor?" asked the Mexican harshly. "How do I know you would keep faith, that you would not ride away — what you call laugh in your sleeve at me? No! You will strike under my own eye — with my revolver at your heart. Then I make sure."

"I'll bet you'd make sure. You'd shoot me down and explain it all fine when your men came running. 'The Gringo dog escaped and killed my dear friend Ramon, but by good luck I shot him before he made his getaway.' Nothing doing."

"Then you refuse?" Pasquale's narrowed eyes glittered in the moonshine.

"You're right I do."

The Mexican rose. "Die like a dog, then, you pigheaded Gringo."

"Just a moment, general. I've got a letter here I wish you'd send north for me. It explains that I shot myself accidentally — lets you out fine in case Uncle Sam begins to ask inconvenient whys about my disappearance."

"And why so much care to save me trouble?" inquired the insurgent leader suspiciously.

"I have to put that in to get you to forward the letter, I reckon. What I want is that my friends should know I'm dead."

As a soldier Pasquale could understand that desire. He hesitated. The sudden death of Americans had of late stirred a good deal of resentment across the line. Why not take the alibi Yeager so conveniently offered him?

"Let's see your letter. But remember I promise nothing," said the Mexican roughly.

Steve moved forward and gave it to him. His heart was pounding against his ribs as does that of a frightened rabbit in the hand. If Pasquale looked at the letter now he had a chance. If he put it in his pocket the chance vanished.

The rebel chief glanced at the sheet of paper, opened it, and stepped back into the moonlight. For just an instant his eyes left Yeager and fell upon the paper. That moment belonged to Steve.

Like a tiger he leaped for the hairy throat of the man.

Pasquale, with a half-articulate cry, stumbled back. But the American was on top of him, his strong, brown fingers were tightening on the sinewy throat. They went down together, the Mexican underneath. As he fell, the head of the general struck the edge of the table. The steel grip of Steve's hand did not relax, for a single sharp cry would mean death to him.

Just once Pasquale rolled half over before his body went slack and motionless. He had fainted.

The first thing Yeager did was to take the bandanna handkerchief from his neck and use it as a gag for his prisoner. He dragged the blankets from their corner and tore one of them into strips. With these he bound the hands of Pasquale behind him and tied his feet together. He unloosened the revolver belt of the Mexican and strapped it about his own waist. The silver-trimmed sombrero he put on his head and the serape he flung round his shoulders and across the lower part of his face in the same way the garment had been worn by its owner.

Steve glanced around to see that he had everything he needed.

"They 's no manner o' doubt but you 're taking a big chancet, son," he drawled to himself after

the manner of an old range-rider he knew. "But we sure gotta take a long shot and gamble with the lid off. Any man who stops S. Yeager tonight is liable to find him a bad hombre. So-long, general."

He opened the door and stepped out. His heart was jumping queerly. The impulse was on him to cut across to the cottonwood grove on the dead run, but he knew this would never do. Instead, he sauntered easily into the moonlight with the negligence of one who has all night before his casual steps.

The sharp command of the guard outside slackened his stride.

"Gabriel," he called back over his shoulder without stopping.

"Si, señor. Buenos tardes."

"Buenos."

He moved at a leisurely pace down the street until he was opposite the cottonwoods. Here he diverged from the dusty road.

"Hope the old scalawag was n't lying about that cavallo waiting for Steve. I'm plumb scairt to death till I get out of this here wolf's den. Me, I'm too tender to monkey with any revolutions. I've knowed it happen frequent that a man got his roof blowed off for buttin' in where he was n't invited." He was still impersonating the old cowman as a vent to his excitement, which found

no expression in the cool, deliberate motions of his lithe body.

He found the horse in the cottonwoods as Pasquale had promised. Swinging to the saddle, he cantered down the road to the outskirts of the village. A sentinel stopped him, and a second time he gave the countersign. He was just moving forward again when some one emerged from the darkness back of the sentry and sharply called to him to stop.

Steve knew that voice, would have known it among a thousand. Since he had no desire at this moment to hold a conversation with Ramon Culvera he drove his heels into the side of the cow pony. The horse leaped forward just as a revolver rang out. So close did the shot come to Yeager that it lifted the sombrero from his head as he dodged.

After he was out of range Yeager laughed. "Pasquale gets his hat back again — ventilated. Oh, well, it's bad enough to be a horsethief without burglarizing a man's haberdashery. You're sure welcome to it, Gabriel."

He kept the horse at a gallop, for he knew he would be pursued. But his heart was lifted in him, for he was leaving behind him a shameful death. All Sonora lay before him in which to hide, and in front of him stretched a distant line beyond which was the U.S.A. and safety.

The bench upon which he was riding dropped to a long roll of hills stretching to the horizon. The chances were a hundred to one that among these he would be securely hidden from the pursuit inside of an hour.

"Git down in yore collar to it, you buckskin," he urged his pony cheerfully. "This ain't no time to dream. You got to travel some, believe me. Steve played a bum hand for all it was worth and I can see where he's right to hit the grit some lively. Burn the wind, you buzzard-haid."

An hour later he drew his pony to a road gait and lifted his head to the first faint flush of a dawning day. He sang softly, because by a miracle of good fortune that coming sun brought him life and not death. The song he caroled was, "When Gabriel blows his horn in the mawnin'."

CHAPTER XI

CHAD DECIDES TO GET BUSY

After his failure to stop Yeager's escape, Culvera lost no time before starting a party in pursuit. He knew there was small chance of finding the American in that rolling sea of hills, but there was at least no harm in making the attempt.

As he walked to Pasquale's headquarters to make a report of the affair, Culvera's mind was full of vague suspicions. How had this man escaped? Had the old general freed him for some purpose of his own? Ramon had seen condemned prisoners released by his chief before. Always within a short time some enemy or doubtful friend of Pasquale had died a violent death. Was it his turn now? Could it be that Pasquale was anticipating his treachery?

To learn that the general was out at three o'clock in the morning lent no reassurance to his fears. After a moment's consideration the young man turned his steps toward the house where Yeager had been confined. But before starting he stopped in the shadow of a barn to see that his revolvers were loose in the scabbards and in good working order. Nor did he cross the moonlit open direct, but worked to his des-

tination by a series of tacks that kept him almost all the time in the darkness.

The seventeen-year-old sentry was still doing duty outside the prison. At sight of Culvera he stopped rolling a cigarette to snatch up his rifle and fling a challenge at him.

"How is it that you have let your prisoner escape?" demanded the officer in Spanish after he had given the countersign.

"Escape? No, señor. Listen. Do you not hear him move?" replied in the boy in the same tongue. "I think the Gringo is having a fit. For ten — twenty — minutes he has beat on the floor and kicked at the walls. To die at daybreak is not to his liking."

"Mil diablos! I tell you I saw him ride away. It is some one else in there."

"Some one else! But, no — that is impossible. Who else could it be?" As he asked the question the boy's jaw fell slack. A horrible suspicion pushed itself into his mind.

"Estupido!" he continued in growing terror. "Can it be — the general?"

"We shall see."

Culvera stepped to the door. It was locked and the key gone. He called aloud. His only answer was a strange, muffled sound like a groan and the beating of feet upon the floor.

With the butt of the sentry's rifle he ham-

mered in the door at the lock and by exerting all his strength forced the fastening. Lying in the middle of the room, bound hand and foot, with his furious face upturned to the moonlight, was Gabriel Pasquale. Culvera asked no foolish questions, wasted no time. Kneeling beside his superior officer, he cut the handkerchief that gagged him and the ropes that tied his limbs. Together Ramon and the guard lifted him to his feet and held him for a moment until his legs regained their power.

"What devil has done this outrage?" asked Ramon.

For a time Pasquale could only swallow and grunt. When the power of speech returned, he broke into fierce and terrible maledictions. His lieutenant listened in silence, extreme concern in his respectful face, an unholy amusement bubbling up behind the deferential exterior.

"Then it was the Gringo?" he asked when his chief ran out of breath and for the moment ceased cursing.

The insurgent leader went off into another explosion of rage. He would cut his heart out while the American devil was still alive. He would stake him out on the desert to broil to death beneath a Mexican sun.

Culvera showed the hat that he had punctured with his bullet. "Thus near I came to

avenging you, general. See! One inch lower and I would have taken off the top of his head. Already Fuentes is pursuing him. Perhaps this Yeager may be dragged back to justice."

Culvera asked no questions as to why the general was alone with a condemned man at such an hour nor as to how the American had succeeded in overpowering him. He understood that his chief's wounded vanity was torturing the man enough to render curiosity unsafe. But the boyish sentry did not know this. He ventured on a sympathetic question.

"But, señor, Your Excellency, how did this Gringo devil, who was unarmed, take away your revolver and tie you?"

Pasquale, teeth clenched, whirled upon him. "You — dog of a peon — let your prisoner walk away without a challenge and then dare to question *me!*"

The old soldier's fist shot out like a pile-driver. The blow lifted the boy from his feet and flung him like a sack of meal against the wall. His body hung there a moment, then dropped to the ground. A faint groan was the only sound that showed he was not unconscious.

The general strode from the room, Culvera at his heels. The brown mask of his face told no stories of how the younger man was enjoying himself.

Before he slept, Ramon had one more pleasant task before him. He roused Harrison to tell him the news. He sat smiling on the foot of the bed, his eyes mocking the startled face of the prizefighter.

"I come to bring you good news, señor," he jeered. "Your countryman has escaped."

Harrison sat up in bed. "What's that? Escaped, did you say? Where to?"

The Mexican swept one arm around airily. "How should I know? He's gone — broke out. He's taken a horse with him."

"A horse!" repeated Harrison stupidly.

"Just so — a horse. To ride upon, doubtless, since he was in somewhat of a hurry. Odd that a horse happened to be waiting saddled for him at two in the morning. Not so?"

The American groped toward the point. "You mean — that he had friends, that some one helped him to get away?"

The other man shrugged his shoulders. "Do I? Quien sabe? Anyhow, he's gone. Must be very disappointing to you, since you had promised yourself to see his translation to heaven at sunrise."

Harrison expressed himself bitterly in language emphatic and profane.

Meanwhile Culvera smiled pleasantly and sympathetically. "You run Pasquale a close

second. He cursed the roof off when he found breath."

"I'm not through with Yeager yet. Believe *me*, he'll have one heluvatime before I'm done," boasted the prizefighter savagely.

"You're still in entire accord with the chief. Yet our friend the Gringo rides away in safety and laughs at you both. Ramon Culvera takes his hat off to Señor Yeager. He has played a winning game with courage and brains."

"I beat his fool head off when he joined the Lunar Company — the very day he joined. When I meet up with him again, I'll repeat," Harrison bragged, hammering the pillow with his clenched fist.

The Mexican looked politely incredulous. "Maybeso. This I say only. Yeager has played one game with Pasquale, one with you, and one with me. He comes out best each time. Of a sureness he is a strong man, wise, cool, resourceful. Is it not so?"

The prizefighter sputtered with wounded vanity. "Him! The boob's nothing but a lucky guy. You'd ought to 'a' seen him after I fixed his map that first day. Down and out he was, take my word for it."

"If Señor Harrison says so," assented Culvera with polite mockery. "But as you say, he laughs best who laughs last. And that reminds

me. He left a note to be forwarded a friend. Pasquale was too crazy mad to see it, so I put it in my pocket."

He handed to the other man the note Steve had written for Threewit. The prizefighter read it in the dim light laboriously.

"It was written, you perceive, before Pasquale shoved his big head into a trap and gave him a chance to escape," explained the insurgent officer.

As Harrison read, certain phases of the situation arranged themselves before his dull mind. He was acutely disappointed at the escape of his enemy, since it was not likely the man would ever be caught again so neatly. But now he forced himself to look beyond this to the consequences. Yeager would tell all he knew when he reached Los Robles. With the troopers warned against him Harrison knew he could no longer move to and fro as freely on the American side. The very fact that he was a suspect would greatly hamper his dealings. The Seymours would probably turn against him for betraying the man who had risked his life to save Phil from the effects of his folly. And what about Ruth? He knew he held her by fear of trouble to Phil and by means of a sort of magnetic clamp he had always imposed upon her will. Would she throw him over now after she heard the story of the cowpuncher?

His eyes were still fastened sulkily on the note while he was slowly realizing these things. One line seemed to stand out from the rest.

Bust up that marriage if you can.

Harrison ground his teeth with impotent rage. This range-rider always had interfered with his affairs from the first moment he had met him. If ever he got the chance again to stamp him out —! The strong fingers of the man worked with the nervous longing to tighten on the throat of the gay youth who had worsted him in the duel the prizefighter had forced upon him. The cowpuncher had introduced himself by knocking him down. A few hours later he had turned a bruised and bleeding face up to him and laughed without fear as if it were of no consequence.

Yeager had stolen from him his reputation as a daring rider and a good shot. He had driven him from the Lunar Company. Now he was going back to spoil his plans for making money by rustling American stock and sending contraband goods across the line. Not only that; he was going to take from him the girl he was engaged to marry.

"By God! I'll give him a run for it," the prizefighter announced savagely and suddenly.

"For what?" asked Culvera maliciously.

"My business," retorted Harrison harshly, reaching for his clothes.

Half an hour later he was galloping toward the north. If he could reach Los Robles before Yeager did, he would turn a trick that would still leave the odds in his favor.

CHAPTER XII

INTO THE DESERT

RUTH was baking apple pies in the kitchen. In her eyes there was a smile and there were little dimples near the corners of her mouth. Evidently she was thinking of something pleasant. Her nimble fingers ran around the edge of the upper crust with a fork and scalloped a design. At odd moments she would burst into a little rhapsody of song that appeared to bubble out of her heart.

Some one stepped into the doorway and shut out the sunlight. Her questioning glance lifted, to meet the heavy frown of the man to whom she was engaged. At sight of him the sunshine was extinguished from her face, just as it had seemed to be from the room when his broad shoulders had filled the opening.

"You — Chad!" she cried. "I thought —"

"Well, I ain't. I'm here," he broke in roughly. "And you don't look glad to death to see me either."

Her gentle eyes reproached him. "You're always welcome. You know that."

His harsh face softened a little as he stepped forward and kissed her. "Maybe I do, but may-

be I like to hear you say so. Girl, I've come to take you with me."

"With you? Where?" Alarm was in the eyes that flashed to meet his.

"To Noche Buena."

"But — what for?"

"Ain't it reason enough that I want you to go? We can get married at Arixico to-night."

She broke into protest disjointed and a little incoherent. "You promised me that — that I could have all the time I wanted. You said — you said —"

"That was when I was here to look after you. But I'll be staying in Sonora quite a while the way my business affairs look. I need you — and what's the sense of waiting, anyhow?"

"No — no! I don't want to — not now. Please don't ask it, Chad. I — I don't want to get married — yet."

Sobs began to choke up her voice. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I don't see why you don't," he insisted sullenly. "Ain't trying to back out, are you?"

"No, but —"

"You better not," he retorted with a threatening look. "I ain't the kind of man it's safe to jilt."

"You promised me all the time I wanted," she repeated. "You would n't hurry me. That was

what you said," she sobbed, breaking down suddenly.

"All right," he conceded ungraciously. "I'm not forcing you to marry me now. But I thought it best, seeing as I've got to ask you to go with me, anyhow. O' course I can put you in charge of Carmen to chaperon you. She's the woman that keeps house for Pasquale. But it kinder seemed to me it would be better if you went as my wife. Then I could take care of you."

"Go with you — now? What do you mean, Chad?"

"It's this fellow Yeager. He's shot himself, and he wants to see you before he dies." From his pocket he took the note Steve had written to Threewit and handed it to Ruth. "You don't have to go, but I hate to turn down a fellow when he's all in and ready to quit the game."

She read the note, her face like chalk. Not for a moment did she doubt that the cowpuncher had written it. Even if her mind had harbored any vague suspicions one line in the letter would have swept them away. *Bust up that marriage if you can.* She knew to what marriage he referred. Nobody but Yeager could have written those words.

"But he says — he says" — her voice shook, but she forced herself to go on — "that this letter is n't to be sent until his death."

"Yep. So it does. But he got to asking for you. So I just lit out to give you a chance to go if you want to. It's up to you. Do just as you please."

"Of course I'll go. Is he — is he as bad as he says?"

"Pretty bad, the doc says. But I reckon he's good for a day or two. My advice would be to start right away, though, if you want to see him alive."

"Yes. That would be best. I'll see mother now." She stopped at the door and leaned against the jamb a little faintly, then turned toward him. "It was fine of you to come, Chad. I know you don't like him. But — I won't forget."

"Oh, tha's all right," he mumbled.

"Have you seen Mr. Threewit yet?" she asked.

"Threewit — no." He was for a moment puzzled at her question. "No — he's out getting a set somewheres in the hills."

Ruth came back and took the note from Harrison's reluctant fingers. "He ought to get this at once. I'll send Billie Brown out with it. He'll explain to Mr. Threewit about us going on ahead and not waiting for him."

The prizefighter did not quite like the idea. He would rather have kept the note himself and

burnt it later. But it was out of his charge now. Without stirring doubts he could not make any objection. Anyhow, he would be in Sonora and safely married to Ruth long before the deception was discovered.

Mrs. Seymour made her protest against such an unconventional trip, but Ruth rode her objections down after the fashion of American girls.

"Why can't I go for a ride with the man to whom I'm engaged? What's wrong with it? I'll stay with the lady that keeps house for General Pasquale. In two or three days I'll be back. Don't say no, mommsie." Her voice broke a little as she pleaded the cause. "He's dying —Mr. Yeager is — and he wants to see me. I'd always blame myself if I did n't go. I've just got to go."

"I don't see why you have to go riding all over the country to see one man when you're engaged to another. In my time —"

"If Chad does n't object, why should you?"

"Oh, I know you'll go. I suppose it's all right, but I wish Phil could go with you too."

"So do I, but of course he can't. Chad says that affairs are so disturbed across the line that probably the Government won't make Phil any trouble, but that if he showed himself in Sonora some of the friends of that man Mendoza would be sure to kill him."

"I suppose so." Mrs. Seymour sighed. Her

harum-scarum young son was on her mind a good deal. "Now, don't you fret, honey, about Steve Yeager. He's the kind of man that will take a lot of killing. A man who has lived outdoors in the saddle for a dozen years is liable to get over a wound that would finish some one else."

In his haste to reach Los Robles before Yeager the prizefighter had ruined the horse he rode. He picked up another one cheap and got for Ruth her brother's pony. Within an hour of his arrival the two animals were brought round for the start.

The mother, still a little troubled in her mind, took Harrison aside for a last word.

"Chad Harrison, you look after my little girl and see no harm comes to her. If anything happens to her I'll never forgive you."

"Rest easy about that, Mrs. Seymour. You don't think any more of Ruth than I do. If I thought there was any danger I sure would n't take her. She'll come back to you safe and sound," he promised.

They rode away in the afternoon sunlight toward the south. It had been understood that they were to spend the night at the Lazy B Ranch, but at the point where the road for the ranch deflected from the main pike Harrison drew rein.

"Too bad there is n't another ranch farther on. It's a little better than six o'clock now. We'll

lose a heap of time by stopping here. Soon the moon will be out and we could keep going till we reach Lone Tree Spring. Stopping there for two or three hours' rest, we could ride in to Noche Buena by breakfast time. But I reckon you're tired, ain't you?"

"I'm not — not a bit," she answered eagerly. "Let's go on. It's cooler traveling in the evening, anyhow."

He appeared to hesitate, then shook his head. "No — o, I expect that would n't be proper. If you was a boy instead of a girl I'd say sure."

"Don't let's be silly, Chad," she pleaded. "We want to get there as soon as we can. It makes no difference if I am a girl."

"I promised your maw I'd take good care of you. Would it be doing that to let you stay up 'most all night?"

"Of course it would. We can sleep some at Lone Tree. I want to go on, Chad."

"All right," he conceded with a manner of reluctance.

This was what Harrison desired. If Yeager reached Los Robles before night a search party would be sent out. It would go straight toward the Lazy B. Chad wanted to get across the line and put as many miles as possible between him and the pursuit.

Deep into the desert they struck, keeping for

the most part to a rapid road gait. The dusty miles spun out behind them as they covered white sunbaked levels, cut across rough hillsides of rubble, dipped into sandy washes, and wound forward through wastes of cactus and zacaton.

By the time the moon was riding high in the heavens Ruth was very tired. Her shoulders drooped and she clung to the pommel of the saddle. But she did not ask Chad to stop and let her rest. She would rather have been whipped than have confessed exhaustion. Whenever she thought he might be looking at her, the weary shoulders straightened with a pathetic attempt at jauntiness.

The man knew how completely fagged she was. Riding behind her through the silver night, his greedy eyes noted her game struggle not to give in. He saw the flowing lines of the girlish figure relax with fatigue. No longer was the gallant little dusky head poised lightly above the flat straight back. But he made no offer to rest. It was essential that they should get beyond any chance of capture by her friends. Once he had her safely in his hands she might sleep round the clock undisturbed.

It was midnight before they rode into the cottonwoods of Lone Tree Spring. Chad lifted her, stiff and cold from lack of circulation, to the ground. She clung to his coat sleeve for a

moment dizzily before she limped forward to the live-oak that gave the place its name. The girl sank down beside the water-hole with her back to the trunk of the tree.

There was faint, humorous apology in the tired smile she lifted to the man.

"I guess I'm what the boys call a quitter, Chad," she decided.

"You're a game little thoroughbred," he blurted out. "You're all in. That's what's the matter with you. Never mind, little girl. I'll fix the tarps so as you can get some sleep. When you wake you'll be good as ever."

"Don't let me sleep too long. Perhaps I'd better just rest."

"No; take a couple of hours' sleep. I'll wake you when it's time to go."

He brought the saddle blankets, spread them on the ground, and covered them with his slicker. His coat served for a pillow. Above her he spread a tarp and tucked the edges under.

"You're good to me, Chad," she told him with a sleepy little smile.

"I aim to be." He stooped and kissed her with a sudden passionate impulse.

Startled at his roughness, she drew back. "Don't . . . please!"

He rose abruptly. "Go to sleep," was his harsh command.

A vague uneasiness that was almost fear stirred in her mind. She did not know this man at all. Except for the merest surface commonplaces he was a stranger to her. Yet she had promised to give her life into his keeping. They were alone together in this moonlit night of stars, a thousand miles from all the safeguards that had always hedged her soft youth. After she had married him they would always be together. Even her mother and Phil would be outsiders. So would all her friends — Daisy Ellington and Frank Farrar . . . and Steve Yeager if he lived. And he must live. She affirmed that passionately, clung to the thought of it as a drowning man does to a plank. He would get well — of course he would . . .

And so she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

THE NIGHT TRAIL

YEAGER rode into Los Robles an hour after Harrison and Ruth had left. He turned in at the Lunar stables the pony Pasquale had so kindly donated to his use and walked across town to the Seymour bungalow. Passing through the garden and round the house, he disappeared without being seen into the remodeled barn where he lodged.

He felt bully. After an adventure that had been a close call he was back home among friends who would be glad to see him. As he took his bath and shaved and dressed he broke occasionally into a whistle of sheer exuberant joy of life. He intended to surprise the folks by walking down and taking his place with the others when the dinner bell rang. Daisy Ellington would clap her hands and sparkle in her enthusiastic way. Shorty would begin to poke fun at him. Mrs. Seymour would probably just smile in her slow, motherly fashion and see that he got one of the choice steaks. And Ruth — would she flash at him her swift dimpled smile of pleasure? Or would she still be harboring malice toward him for having warned her against Harrison?

Steve waited until he thought they would be seated before he opened the door and stepped into the dining-room. The effect was not at all what he had expected. Daisy was the first to see him. She dropped her knife on the plate with a clatter and gave a little scream. Shorty stopped a spoonful of soup halfway to his mouth, as if he were waiting to have a still picture of himself taken. His eyes stared and his jaw fell. Mrs. Seymour, who was bringing a platter from the kitchen, stood stock-still in the doorway. The expression on her face arrested Yeager's smile.

"What's the matter with you all? Looks like you were seeing a ghost," he said.

"Where did you come from, Steve Yeager?" demanded Mrs. Seymour.

"Me? Why, I came from my room — reached town an hour or so ago."

Something cold clutched at the heart of the mother. "Where from? Were n't you in Sonora?"

"Sure I was. At Noche Buena. And I want to tell you that I've had enough of that burg for quite some time."

Daisy broke in. "Is n't it true that you were shot?"

He turned to her, surprised. "How did you hear that story already. No, it ain't true. I was to have been shot this mawnin', but I broke jail and made a getaway."

"But — your letter said you had shot yourself and could n't live long. I read it myself. Mr. Threewit showed it to me before he left."

"And Mr. Harrison told us it was true," corroborated Mrs. Seymour. She knew something was wrong, but as yet she could not guess what.

"Harrison! Has he been here?" asked Yeager sharply.

"He and Ruth left this afternoon for Noche Buena. He said you wanted to see her before you died and he showed us the letter you had written."

The range-rider stood paralyzed. The truth flashed numbingly over his brain.

"Ruth — gone with Harrison — to Noche Buena," was all he could say.

Again Daisy cut in, this time sharply. "Tell us your story, Steve. What is it that 's wrong?"

In a dozen sentences he told it. They listened tensely. The mother was the first to break the silence after he had finished. She began to sob. Steve put an arm across her shoulder awkwardly.

"Now, don't you, Mrs. Seymour. Don't you take on. We'll get right on his trail." He turned abruptly to Orman. "Get horses saddled. We'll hit the road right away. Daisy, call up Threewit and let him know. I'll take your gat, Shorty."

The edge of decision was in his voice. Nobody disputed the orders of this lean, brown, sunbaked

youth with the alert, quiet, masterful eyes. In his manner was something more deadly than threats. More than one of those present thought he would not like to be Harrison.

"Mr. Threewit has gone. He and Frank started for Noche Buena almost an hour ago. They went because of your letter," explained Miss Ellington.

"Good. We'll probably catch them. Jackson, find out if they went armed and see that we all have rifles as well as six-guns. Get a move on you. We'll start in ten minutes from the hotel.

Within the stipulated time they were in the saddle. Steve looked his posse over with an eye competent and vigilant. "Orman, you and Bob ride straight to the Lazy B. Harrison gave it out he was going to stop there for the night. Me, I think he was lying. If he has n't been there, cut acrost to Gila Creek and follow the bed. Jackson and Dan, you go straight south for the old Pima water-hole and sweep along below the edge of the mesa. I'll have a try more to the east. Mind, no slip-up, boys. And don't forget Harrison wears his guns low. If you have to shoot, aim to kill."

Phil Seymour came running down the road. "What's this they're telling about Ruth and Harrison?" he demanded.

Yeager had no time for explanations. He turned the boy over to one of the others. "Tell

him about it, Jackson. If he wants to go along, take him with you and Dan. We'll all meet tomorrow noon at Sieber's Pass."

He shot down the road at a gallop, leaving behind him a cloud of gray dust. The others followed at a canter. Their horses had to cover many miles before morning and there was no use in running them off their legs at the start.

Jackson, waiting for Phil to rope and saddle a pony, yelled a caution to the others.

"Keep yore shirts on, boys. This ain't no hundred-yard dash. Steve's burnin' the wind because he's got to haid off Harrison from Pasquale's camp. All we got to do is to drive him up to Steve."

Phil cut out and roped a pony, then slapped on a saddle. Presently he and Jackson were following the others down the dust-filled road.

The boy spoke his fears aloud, endeavoring to reassure himself.

"Chad won't hurt Ruth any. He would n't dare. This country won't stand for that kind of a play with a girl. Arizona would hang him to the first telegraph pole that was handy."

The cowpuncher looked at him and spoke dryly. "I reckon the skunk's been out of Arizona quite some time. He's in greaser land now, and I never heard tell that Pasquale was so darned particular what his men did. Just tie a

knot in this: if Harrison reaches the insurrecto camp with yore sister, she'll come back as his wife — or not at all."

"By God! I'll kill Harrison at sight if he hurts a hair of her head," the boy cried, a lump in his throat.

"Mebbe you will, mebbe you won't. Chad ain't just what you'd call a white man. He'll shoot out of the chaparral if he's pressed. Someone's going to git hurt if we bump into Mr. Harrison. It won't be no picnic a-tall to take him. He's liable to be more hos-tile than a nest of yellow jackets."

"Leave him to me if we come up with him. I'll shoot it out with him," the boy cried wildly.

Jackson grinned. "You're crazy with the heat, boy. What do you reckon I bought chips in this game for? I want a crack at the coyote myself."

Phil and Jackson caught up with old Dan a mile or so beyond the point where the road to the Lazy B left the main traveled trail.

"The other boys hitting the dust for the ranch?" asked Jackson.

"Yep."

"Yeager's got it right. They won't find Harrison there. He'll go through with his play. Chad's no quitter."

Dan nodded. He was a reticent man of about fifty-five with a bald head and a face of wrinkled leather.

"We'll git him sure," Phil spoke up, announcing his hope rather than his conviction. "Steve knows what he's doing, you bet."

Yeager himself was not so sure. Doubts tortured him as to the destination of Harrison. Perhaps, after all, he might be making for some refuge in the hills and not for Pasquale's headquarters. He knew that as soon as word reached them the Lazy B riders would begin to comb the desert in pursuit. But what were a dozen riders among these thousand hill pockets of the desert? The best chance was to catch the man at some one of the few water-holes. But if he pushed on at full speed the chances were all in his favor considering the long start he had.

The range-rider was astride the fastest horse in the Lunar stables. Steve had taken his pick of the mounts, for his work was cut out for him. Hitherto the luck had all been with Harrison. If Yeager had not met one of the old Lone Star boys, now riding for the Hashknife outfit, and stopped to join him in a long talk over their cigarettes, Steve would have reached Los Robles in time to spoil the man's plan. Or if he had gone direct to Mrs. Seymour instead of fooling away a good hour and a half in his room, he would have

cut down his enemy's start by so much golden time.

Now all he could do was to get every foot of speed from his horse that could be coaxed. He rode like a Centaur, giving with his lithe, supple body to every motion of the animal. But though he took steep hillsides of shale on the run, the pony slithering down in a slide of rubble like a cat, the rider's alert eyes watched the footing keenly. He could afford if necessary to break a leg himself, but he could not afford to have the horse suffer such an accident. Not for nothing had he ridden on the roundup for many years. Few men even in Arizona could have negotiated safely such a bit of daredevil travel as he was doing this night.

His brains were busy, too, on the problem before him. Times and distances he figured, took into account the animals Harrison and Ruth were riding, estimated her strength and her companion's feverish haste to reach safety with her. They would have to stop at a water-hole somewhere, either on Gila Creek, or the old Pima camping-ground, or else at Lone Tree Spring. The most direct route to Noche Buena was by Lone Tree. Harrison was in a deuce of a hurry. Therefore he would choose the shortest way. So Yeager guessed and hoped.

His watch told him it was an hour past mid-

night when Steve drew close to Lone Tree Spring. He was following a sandy wash into the soft bed of which the hoofs of his horse sank without noise. They were perhaps two hundred yards from the spring when the ears of his pony lifted. That was enough for Yeager. He dismounted and trailed the reins, guessing that the wind had brought the scent of other horses to his own. Quietly he moved forward, rifle in hand ready for action.

The heart of him jumped when he caught sight of two picketed horses grazing on the bench above. He worked forward with infinite care along the bank of the wash till he reached the first of the cottonwoods. From here he could catch a glimpse of something huddled lying under the live-oak. This no doubt was the sleeping girl. The figure of a heavy-set man stood with his back to Yeager in silhouette against the skyline.

Yeager crawled forward another fifteen yards. A twig snapped under his knee. The figure in silhouette whirled. Steve rose at the same instant, rifle raised to his shoulder.

"Don't move," he advised quietly.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CAVE MEN

HARRISON stared at him dumfounded, chin down and jutting, his hand hovering longingly close to the butt of a revolver. He stood so for an instant in silence, crouched and tense.

"Damn you, so you're here," he said at last in a low, hoarse voice.

"Don't make another pass like that or I'll plug you. Unbuckle that belt and drop it. That's right. Now, kick it from you."

"What do you want?" demanded the man under the gun savagely after he had obeyed instructions.

"You know what I want, you wolf." Steve moved forward till he was about fifteen feet from the other. His eyes did not lift for a moment from the man he covered.

They glared at each other, two savage, primeval men with the murder lust in their hearts. All that centuries of civilization had brought them was just now quenched.

Then the woman, the third factor in the triangle, stirred restlessly and awoke. She looked at them incuriously from innocent eyes still heavy with slumber. Gradually the meaning of

the scene came home to her, and with it a realization that Steve Yeager was standing before her in the flesh.

"You — here!" she cried, scarce believing.

"The cur lied," explained the cowpuncher. "It was a frame-up to get you in his power."

"But your letter said —"

"Never mind about that now. Go down into the wash and bring up my horse. It needs water."

She hesitated. "You're not going to hurt him, Steve?"

"That's between him and me. Do as I say."

Ruth scarcely recognized in this grim, hard-faced man with the blazing eyes the gay youth whom she knew at home. She felt in his manner the steel of compulsion. Without further protest she moved to obey him. She was fearful of what was about to take place, but her heart leaped with gladness. Steve was alive and strong. It was not true that he lay with the life ebbing out of him, all the supple strength stolen from his well-knit body. For the moment that was happiness enough.

Harrison, watching with narrowed eyes the stone-wall face of his captor, jeered at him hardily.

"Now you got a strangle holt on me, what you aim to do?"

"I'm going to take you back to the boys that are combing these hills for you. They'll do all that's done."

The prisoner's sneer went out of commission. He did not need to ask what Arizona cowpunchers would do to him under the circumstances.

"I figured your size was about a twenty-two — not big enough to fight it out alone with me. Once is a-plenty."

The cave man's desire to beat down his enemy with his naked hands smouldered fiercely in the cowpuncher's heart.

"Step out in front of me and saddle those horses," he ordered.

Harrison looked at him murderously. His mouth was an ugly, crooked gash. Boiling with rage, he saddled, cinched, and watered the horses.

Ruth had returned with Steve's pony. Her heart beat fast with excitement. An instinct told her they were about to come to grips in epic struggle.

"You're mighty high-heeled now when you got a gun thrown on me. Put it in the discard and I'll beat the life out o' you," threatened the prizefighter.

Not releasing the other man with his eyes, Yeager lent one hand to help Ruth mount. He gave clear, curt instructions in a level voice.

"Take all three horses and ride to the edge of

the mesa. Wait there. One of us — either him or me — will come up there after a while. If it's him, take all the horses and light out. Keep the moon on your left and ride straight forward till daybreak. You'll see a gash in the hills about where the sun rises. That's Sieber's Pass. The boys will be waiting for you. Understand?"

"Yes, but — What are you going to do, Steve?" she cried almost in a whisper.

"That's my business — and I'm going to attend to it. Keep your mind on the directions I've given. If it's Harrison that comes up over the hill, get right out with all the horses. Gimme your promise on that."

Trembling, she gave it to him.

"Don't you be afraid. No need of that. *It won't be him. It'll be me that comes.* But if it should be him, don't let him get close. Shoot him first. It will be to save you from worse than death. Have you got the nerve to do it?"

Something in his manner, in his voice, rang a bell in her heart. She nodded, her throat too dry for speech.

"All right. Go now. And don't make any mistake whatever you do. Follow out exactly what I've told you."

Again she promised. He handed to her the rifle. She rode away, taking the other horses with her.

When she was out of sight in a dip of the draw, Harrison spoke.

"Well, what is it to be? I see you got your gats yet. Going to shoot me down like a coyote?"

"That's what you deserve. That's what you'd get if the Lazy B boys got hold of you. But I'm going to kill you with my bare hands, you wolf."

With what seemed a single motion of his hands he unbuckled the revolver belt from his waist and flung it from him. Crouched like a tiger, he moved slowly forward, the flow of his muscles rhythmic and graceful.

The prizefighter could scarce believe his luck. He threw out his salient chin and laughed triumphantly. "You damned fool! I've got you at last. I've got you."

Light as a panther, Yeager lashed out with his left and caught flush the point of that protruding chin. The grinning head went back as if it had been on hinges. Shoulders, buttocks, and heels hit the ground together. The range-rider was on him as a terrier lights on a rat. Jarred though his brains were, the instinct of self-preservation served the man underneath. He half turned, flung an arm around the neck of his foe, and clung tightly even while he covered up. Steve's fist hammered at the back of the close-cropped head. The prizefighter swung over, face down,

rose to his hands and knees by sheer strength, then reached for his neck grip again.

Yeager eluded him, throwing all his weight forward to force his opponent down again. Harrison gave suddenly. They rolled over and over, fighting and clawing like wild cats, two bipeds in a death struggle as fierce and ruthless as that between wolves or grizzlies. No words were spoken. They were back in the primitive Stone Age before speech was invented. Snarling and growling, they fought with an appalling fury.

Presently they were back on their feet again. Toe to toe they stood, rocking each other with sledgehammer blows. Blood poured from the beaten faces of both. Harrison clinched. They staggered to and fro before they went down heavily, Yeager underneath. The prizefighter thrust his right forearm under the chin of his enemy and with his left thumb and middle finger gouged at the eyes of the man beneath him. Steve's legs moved up, encircled those of the rustler, and swiftly straightened. With a bellow of pain Harrison flung himself free and clambered to his feet. The legs of his trousers had been ripped open for a foot. Blood streamed from his calves where the sharp rowels of the range-rider's spurs had torn the flesh.

They quartered over the ground many times

as they fought. Sometimes they were on their feet slogging hard. Once, at least, they crouched knee to knee. Lying on the ground, they struck no less furiously and desperately. All sense of fair play, of sportsmanship, was gone. They struggled to kill and not be killed.

Their lungs labored heavily. They began to stagger as they moved. The muscles of their arms lost their resilience. Their legs dragged as though weighted. Harrison was, if a choice might be made, in worse case. He was the stronger man, but he lacked the tireless endurance of the other. Watching him with animal wariness, Yeager knew that the man who went down first would stay down. His enemy was sagging at the knees. He could with difficulty lift his arms. He fought only in spurts. All this was true of himself, too. But somewhere in him was that dynamic will not to be beaten that counted heavily as a reserve.

The prizefighter called on himself for the last attack. He stumbled forward, head down, in a charge. An aimless blow flung Steve against the trunk of the live-oak. His arms thrashing wildly, Harrison plunged forward to finish him. The cowpuncher ducked, lurched to one side. Against the bark of the tree crashed the fist of the other, swinging him half round.

Yeager flung himself on the back of his foe.

Human bone and flesh and muscle could do no more. The knees of Harrison gave and he sank to the ground, his head falling in the spring. His opponent, breathless and exhausted, lay motionless on top of him. For a time both lay without stirring. The first to move was Steve. He noticed that the nose and mouth of the senseless man lay beneath the water. By exerting all his strength he pulled the battered head almost out of the water. Very slowly and painfully he got to his feet. Leaning against the tree for support, he looked down at the helpless white face of the man he had hated so furiously only a few minutes earlier. That emotion had entirely vanished. It was impossible to feel any resentment against that bruised and bleeding piece of clay. Steve was conscious only of a tremendous desire to lie down and go to sleep.

He laved his face with water as best he could, picked up the belt he had thrown away, and drunkenly climbed the hill toward Ruth.

She cried out at sight of him with a heart of joy, but as he lurched nearer she slid from the horse and ran toward him. Could this be the man she had left but half an hour since so full of vital strength and youth? His vest and shirt were torn to ribbons so that they did not cover the mauled and bruised flesh at all. Every exposed inch of his head and body had its wounds to show. He

was drenched with blood. The sight of his face wrung her heart.

"What did he do to you?" she cried with a sob, slipping an arm round his waist to support him.

"I said I'd be the one to come," he told her as he leaned against the neck of his pony.

"Oh, why did you do it?" And swiftly on the heels of that cry came the thought of relief for him. "I'll get you water. I'll bathe your wounds."

"No. We've got to get out of here. Any time some of Pasquale's men may come. His camp is not far."

"But you can't go like that. You're hurt."

"That's all right. Nothing the matter with me. Can you get on alone?"

"Can you?" she asked in turn, after she had swung to the saddle.

He had to try it three times before he succeeded in getting into the seat. So weak was he that as the horse moved he had to cling with both hands to the pommel of the saddle to steady himself. Ruth rode close beside him, all solicitude and anxiety.

"You ought not to be riding. I know your wounds hurt you cruelly," she urged in a grave and troubled voice.

"I reckon I can stand the grief. When I've

had a bath and a good sleep I'll be good as new."

She asked timidly the question that filled her mind. "Did you — What about him?"

"Did I kill him? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"No, I reckon not. He was lying senseless when I left, but I expect he'll come to."

"Oh, I hope so . . . I do hope so."

He looked at her, asking no questions. Some men would have broken into denunciation of the scoundrel, would have defended the course they had followed. This man did neither the one nor the other. She might think what she pleased. He had fought from an inner compulsion, not to win her applause. No matter how she saw it he could offer no explanations or apologies.

"I hope so because — because of you," she continued. "Now I know him for what he is. I'm through with him for always." Then, in a sudden burst of frankness: "I never did trust him, really."

"You've had good luck. Some women find out things too late," he commented simply.

After that they rode in silence, except at long intervals when she asked him if he was in pain or too tired to travel. The lightening of the sky for the coming dawn found them still in the saddle with the jagged mountain line rising vaguely

before them in the darkness like a long shadow. Presently they could make out the gash in the range that was Sieber's Pass.

"Some of the boys will be waiting there for us, I reckon," Steve said. "They'll be glad to see you safe."

"If I'm safe, they'll know who brought it about." Her voice trembled as she hurried on: "I can't thank you. All I can say is that I understand from what you saved me."

He looked away at the distant hills. "That's all right. I had the good luck to be in the right place. Any of the boys would have been glad of the chance."

After a time they saw smoke rising from a hollow in the hills. They were climbing steadily now by way of a gulch trail. This opened into a draw. A little back from the stream a man was bending over a camp-fire. He turned his head to call to a second man and caught sight of them. It was Orman. He let out a whoop of gladness when he recognized Ruth. Others came running from a little clump of timber.

Phil lifted his sister from the saddle and kissed her. He said nothing, since he could not speak without breaking down.

Jackson looked at Steve in amazement. "You been wrastling with a circular saw?" he asked.

It hurt Yeager's broken face to smile, but he

attempted it. "Had a little difference of opinion with Chad. We kind o' talked things over."

Nobody asked anything further. It is the way of outdoor Arizona to take a good deal for granted. This man was torn and tattered and bruised. His face was cut open in a dozen places. Purple weals and discolorations showed how badly his body had been punished. He looked a fit subject for a hospital. But every one who looked into his quiet, unconquered eyes knew that he had come off victor.

"First off, a bath in the creek to get rid of these souvenirs Chad sent to my address. Then it's me for the hay," he announced.

Ruth watched him go, lean, sinewy, and wide-shouldered. His stride was once more light and strong, for with the passing hours power had flowed back into his veins. She sighed. He was a man that would go the limit for his friends. He was gentle, kindly, full of genial and cheerful courage. But she knew now there was another side to him, a quality that was tigerish, that snarled like a wolf in battle. Why was it that men must be so?

Old Dan chuckled. "Ain't he the lad? Stove up to beat all get-out. But I'd give a dollar Mex to see the other man. He's sure a pippin to see this glad mawnin'."

Something of what was groping in her mind

broke from Ruth into words. "Why do men fight like that? It's dreadful."

Dan scratched his shiny bald head. "It straightens out a heap of things in this little old world. My old man used to say to me when I was a kid, 'Son, don't start trouble, but when it's going, play yore hand out.' That's how it is with Steve. He ain't huntin' trouble anywhere, but he ce'tainly plays his hand out."

Phil took charge of his sister. He gave her coffee and breakfast, then arranged blankets so that she could get a few hours' sleep in comfort. Orman rode back to Los Robles to carry the word to Mrs. Seymour that Ruth had been rescued and was all right. The others lounged about camp while Yeager and the girl slept.

At noon they were wakened. Coffee was served again, after which they rode down from the pass and started home. Before supper-time they were back in Los Robles.

CHAPTER XV

STEVE WINS A HAM SANDWICH

YEAGER was roused from sleep next morning by a knock at the door. His visitor was Fleming Lennox, leading man of the company.

"Say, Steve, what about Threewit and Farrar? I just telephoned to the Lazy B Ranch and the foreman says his boys did not run across them. You know what that means. They've reached old Pasquale's camp."

Yeager sat up in bed and whistled softly to himself. This was a contingency he had not foreseen. What would the Mexican chief do to two of the range-rider's friends who delivered themselves into his hands so opportunely? Steve did not think he would kill them offhand, but he was very sure they would not be at liberty to return home. Moreover, Harrison would be on the ground, eager for revenge. The prizefighter never had liked Farrar. He had sworn to get even with Threewit. An added incentive to this course was the fact that he knew them both to be on very good terms with his chief enemy. Without doubt Chad would do his best to stimulate the insurgent leader to impulsive violence.

The man in bed concealed his apprehension under a comical grin. "This life's just one damned thing after another, looks like," he commented. "I did n't figure on that. I thought sure the boys would bump into Threewit. That slip-up surely spills the beans."

"You don't think even Pasquale would dare hurt them, do you?" asked Lennox anxiously.

"Search me. Pasquale's boiled in p'ison, especially when he is drunk. He'd do whatever he had a mind to do."

"What's the matter with us sending a messenger down there with a fake wire from the old man to Threewit telling him to hustle up and get busy right away on a feature film? Pasquale would have to show his hand, anyhow. We'd know where we were at."

Yeager assented. "He'd have to turn them loose or hold them. But even if he turned them loose, he might arrange to have them accidentally killed by bandits before they reached home. Still, it would put one thing right up to him — that their friends know where they are and are ready to sick Uncle Sam on him if he don't act proper."

Manderson, Miss Winters, and Daisy Ellington were called into council after breakfast. The situation was canvassed from all sides, but in the end they stood where they had been at the beginning. Nobody felt sure what Pasquale

would do or knew whether the visitors at his camp would be detained as prisoners. The original suggestion of Lennox seemed the best under the circumstances.

Old Juan Yuste was brought in from the stables and given the telegram. He was told nothing except that it was urgent that Threewit get the message as soon as possible. The five-dollar gold-piece which Lennox tossed to the Mexican drew a grin that exposed a mouth half empty of teeth.

In the absence of both Threewit and Farrar the business of producing films was at a standstill. The members of the company took an enforced holiday. Manderson read a novel. Daisy wrote letters. Lennox and Miss Winters went for a long stroll. Steve helped Baldy Cummings mend broken saddles and other property stuff. The extras played poker.

Juan returned late in the evening on the second day. He brought with him a letter addressed to Lennox. It was from Pasquale. The message was written in English. It said: —

> Greetings, señor. Your friends are the guests of General Pasquale. They came to Noche Buena to find one Señor Yeager. They are resolved to stay here until he is found by them, even though they remain till the day of their death.

The note was signed, "Siempre, Gabriel Pasquale."

After reading, it, Yeager handed the note back to Lennox and spoke quietly.

"Pasquale passes the buck up to me. I've been thinking he might do that."

"You mean —?"

"— That he serves notice he's going to kill our friends if I don't give myself up to him."

"But would he? Dare he?"

Yeager shrugged. "It will happen in the usual Mexican way — killed by accident while trying to escape, or else ambushed by Federals on the desert while coming home, according to the story that will be dished up to the papers. He will be full of regrets and apologies to our Government, but that won't help Threewit or Frank any."

"Don't you think he's bluffing? Pasquale has n't a thing against either of them. He surely would n't murder them in cold blood."

"I don't know whether he is or not. But it's up to me to sit in and take cards. They went down to Noche Buena on my account. I'm going down on theirs."

Lennox stared incredulously at him. "You don't mean you're going to give yourself up. Pasquale would hang up your hide to dry."

"That's just what he would do, after he had boiled me in oil or given me some other pleasant

diversion. No, I reckon I'll not give myself up. I'll join his army again."

"I give it up, Steve. Tell me the answer."

"As a private this time."

"Fat chance you'll have, with Friend Harrison there to spot you, not to mention the old boy himself and Culvera."

"It won't be Steve Yeager that joins. It will be a poor peon from the hills named Pedro or Juan or Pablo."

"You're going to rig up as a Mexican?"

"Some guesser, Lennox."

"You can't put it over, not with your face looking like a pounded beefsteak. I judge you don't know what an Exhibit A you are at present. The first time Chad looked at you, he would recognize the result of his uppercuts and swings."

"So he would. I'll have to wait a week or so. Send Juan back to Pasquale and tell him you hear I'm in the Lone Star country where I used to punch. Say you've sent for me with an offer to take Harrison's place in the company, and that if I come you'll arrange with him to have me taken by his men while we're doing a set near the line. He'll fall for that because he'll be so keen to get me that any chance will look good to him. You'll have to give Juan a tip not to let it out I'm here."

"What can you do if you get into Pasquale's camp as one of his men?"

"I don't know. Something will turn up."

"You're taking a big chance, Steve."

"Not because I want to. But I've got to do what I can for the boys. This ain't just the time for a 'watchful waiting' policy, seems to me. If you've got anything better to offer, I'm agreeable to listen."

"The only thing I can think of is to appeal to Uncle Sam."

"That won't get us much. But there's no harm in trying. Have the old man stir up a big dust at Washington. After plenty of red tape an official representation will be made to Pasquale. He will lie himself black in the face. More correspondence. More explanations. Finally, if the prisoners are still alive, they will start home. Mebbe they'll get here. Mebbe they won't."

"Then you don't think it's worth trying?"

"Sure I do. Every little helps. It might make Pasquale sit steady in the boat till I get a chance to pull off something."

When Daisy Ellington heard of the plan she went straight to Yeager.

"What's this I hear about you committing suicide?" she demanded.

"News to me, compadre," smiled the puncher.

"You're not really going down there to shove

your head into that den of wolves, are you?" Without waiting for an answer she pushed on to a prediction. "Because if you do, they'll surely snap it off."

"Wish you'd change your brand of prophecy, niña. You see, this is the only head I've got. I'm some partial to it."

"Then you had better keep away from that old Pasquale and Chad Harrison. Don't be foolish, Steve." She caught the lapels of his coat and shook him fondly. "If you don't know when you're well off, your friends do. We're not going to let you go."

"Threewit and Farrar," he reminded her.

"They'll have to take their chance. Besides, Pasquale is n't going to hurt them. There would n't be any sense in it. So there's no use us getting panicky."

"I don't reckon I'm exactly panicky, Daisy. But it won't do to forget that Pasquale is one bad hombre. Harrison is another, and he's got it in for the boys. We can't lie down and quit on them, can we? I notice they did n't do that with me."

"What good will it do for you to go and get trapped too? It's different with you. They've got it in for you down there. It's just foolhardiness for you to go back," she told him sharply.

"You're sure some little boss," he laughed. "I'm willing to be reasonable. If I can prove to you that I stand a good chance to pull it off down at Noche Buena, will you feel different about it?"

"Yes, if you can — but you can't," she agreed, flashing at him the provocative little smile that was one of her charms.

"Bet you a box of chocolates against a ham sandwich I can."

"You're on," she nodded airily.

"Better order that ham sandwich," he advised, mocking her lazily with his friendly eyes.

"Oh, I don't know. You're not so much, Cactus Center. I expect to be eating chocolates soon."

Her gay audacity always pleased him. He settled himself for explanations soberly, but back of his gravity lay laughter.

"You've got the wrong hunch on me. I ain't any uneducated sheepherder. Don't run away with that notion. Me, I went through the first year of the High School at Tucson. I know all about *amo*, *amas*, *amat*, and how to make a flying tackle. Course oncet in a while I slip up in grammar. There's heap too much grammar in the world, anyhow. It plumb chokes up a man's language."

"All right, Steve. Show me. I'm from Joplin,

Missouri. When are you going to do all this proving?"

"We won't set a date. Some time before I leave."

Yeager walked from the studio to his rooming-place. Ruth Seymour met him on the porch and stopped him. It was the first time he had seen her since their return.

"Is it true — what Mr. Manderson says — that you are going back to Noche Buena?" she flung at him.

"I'm certainly getting on the society page," he laughed. "Manderson has a pretty good reputation. I should n't wonder if what he says is true."

The face beneath the crown of soft black hair was colorless except for the trembling lips.

"Why? Why must you go? You've just escaped from there with your life. Are you mad?"

"Look here, Miss Ruth. I've just had a roundup with Miss Ellington about this. I'm going to take a whirl at rescuing our friends. Pasquale can't put over such a raw deal without getting a run for his money from me. I'm going back there because it's up to me to go. There are some things a man can't do. He can't quit when his friends need him."

She was standing in the doorway, her head

leaning against the jamb so that the fine curve of the throat line showed a beating pulse. Something in the pose of the slim, graceful figure told him of repressed emotion.

"That is absurd, Mr. Yeager. You can't do anything for them if you go."

"Everybody sizes me up for a buzzard-head," he complained whimsically.

The gravity did not lift from her young, quick eyes.

"If you go they'll kill you," she said in a voice as dry as a whisper.

"Sho! Nothing to that. I'm going down disguised. I'll be safe enough."

"I suppose . . . nothing can keep you from going." A sob choked up in her throat as she spoke.

"No. I've got to go."

"You think you have a right to play at dice with your life! Don't your friends count with you at all?"

"It's because they do that I'm going," he answered gently.

Her troubled eyes rested on his. The protest in her heart was still urgent, but she dared go no further. Some instinct of maidenly reticence curbed the passionate rebellion against his decision. If she said more, she might say too much. With a swift, sinuous turn of the slender body

she ran into the house and left him standing there.

Daisy sat at one end of the pergola mending a glove. It was in the pleasant cool of the evening just as dusk was beginning to fall. A light breeze rustled the rose-leaves and played with the tendrils of her soft, wavy hair. The coolness was grateful after the heat of an Arizona day.

The front gate creaked. A man was coming in, a Mexican of the peon class. He moved up the walk toward her with a slight limp. As he drew closer, she observed negligently that he was of early middle age, ragged, and of course dirty. Age and lack of soap had so dyed his serape that the original color was quite gone.

He bowed to her with the native courtesy that belongs to even the peons of his race. A swift patter of Spanish fell from his lips.

Miss Ellington shook her head. "No sabe Español."

The man gushed into a second eruption of liquid vowels, accompanied this time by gestures which indicated that he wanted food.

The young woman nodded, went into the house, and secured from Mrs. Seymour a plate of broken fragments left over from supper. With this and a cup of coffee she returned to the pergola.

"Gracias, señorita." The shining black poll of the man bowed over the donation as he accepted it.

He sat cross-legged among the roses and ate what had been given him. Daisy observed critically that his habit of eating was not at all nice. He discarded the fork she had brought, using only the knife and his fingers. The meat he tore apart and devoured ravenously, cramming it wolfishly into his mouth as fast as he could. A few days before she had fallen into an argument with Steve Yeager about the civilization of the Mexicans. She wished he could see this specimen.

The man spoke, after he had cleaned the plate, licked up the gravy, and gulped down the coffee. His words fell in a slow drawl, not in Spanish, but in English.

"Don't you reckon mebbe I could get a ham sandwich too?"

The actress jumped. "Steve, you fraud!" she screamed, and flew at him.

"Do I win?" he asked, protecting himself as he backed away.

"Of course you do. Why have n't we been using you up stage in the Mexican sets? You're perfect. How did you ever get your hair so slick and black?"

"I've been studying make-ups since I joined the Lunar Company," he told her.

"How about your Spanish? Is it good enough to pass muster?"

"I learned to jabber it when I was a year old before I did English."

"Then you'll do. I defy even Harrison to recognize you."

He gave her his Mexican bow. "Gracias, señorita."

CHAPTER XVI

THE HEAVY PAYS A DEBT

When Threewit and Farrar reached Noche Buena, Pasquale was absent from camp, but Culvera made them suavely welcome.

"Señor Yeager has recovered and was called away unexpectedly on business," he explained; adding with his lip smile, "He will be desolated to have missed you."

"He is better, then?"

"Indeed, quite his self. He nearly died from gunshot wounds, but unless he suffers a relapse he is entirely out of present danger."

"Should n't have thought it would have been safe to travel yet," Farrar returned.

He was uneasy in his mind, sensing something of mocking irony in the manner of the Mexican. It was strange that Yeager, wounded to death as his letter had said, was able in two days to be up and around again.

"We were anxious to have him stop, but he was in a hurry. Personally I did my best to get him to stay." Culvera's smile glittered reminiscently: "The truth is that he thought our climate unhealthy. He was afraid of heart failure."

Threewit scoffed openly. "Absurd. The man

is the finest physical specimen I ever saw. If you had ever seen him on the back of an outlaw bronc, you'd know his heart was all right."

The door of the room opened and Harrison came in. He stopped, mouth open with surprise at sight of the Americans.

"Some of Mr. Yeager's anxious friends come down to inquire about his health, Harrison. Did he seem to you healthy last time you saw him?" the Mexican asked maliciously.

Like a thunderclap the prizefighter broke loose in a turbid stream of profanity. It boiled from his lips like molten lava from a crater. The raucous words poured forth from a heart furious with rage. The man was beside himself. He raved like a madman — and the object of his invective was Stephen Yeager.

And all the time the man cursed he stamped painfully about the room, a sight to wonder at. His face was so swollen, so bruised and discolored, that he was hardly recognizable. He had managed to creep into another suit of clothes after the doctor had dressed his wounds and sewed up his cuts, but these could not hide the fact that every step was a torment to his pummeled ribs and lacerated flesh. He was game. Another man in his condition would have been in the hospital. Harrison dragged himself about because he would not admit that he was badly hurt.

Culvera turned to the Americans and explained the situation in a few sentences. He was enjoying himself extremely because the vanity of his companion writhed at the position in which he was placed.

"Your friend Yeager was not pleasing to our general and was sentenced to be shot. He escaped in the night. Our companion Harrison, also I believe a compatriot and friend of yours, is a charmer of ladies' hearts, as you will perceive with one glance at his handsome face. Behold, then, an elopement, romance, and moonshine. 'Linda de mi alma, amor mia, come,' he cries. The lady comes. But, alas! for true love, the brutal vaquero follows. They meet, and — I draw a merciful curtain over the result."

Harrison was off again in crisp and crackling language. When at last his vocabulary was exhausted, he turned savagely upon Threewit and Farrar.

"I'll see Pasquale gets the right dope on you fellows too. You're a pair of damned fools for coming here, believe *me*. If the old man can't get Yeager, he'll take his friends instead. Did n't I tell you I'd make you sick of what you did to me, Threewit? Good enough. I've got you both where I want you now. You'll get plenty of hell, take my word for it."

Threewit turned with dignity to the Mexican.

"I have nothing to say to this man, Major Culvera. But you are a gentleman. We have been deceived. I ask for an escort as far as the border to see us safely back."

Culvera was full of bland hospitality. "Really I can't permit you to leave before the general returns. He would never forgive me. When friends travel so far, they must be entertained. Not so?"

"Are we prisoners? Is that what you mean?" demanded Farrar bluntly.

The major shook his finger toward him with smiling deprecation. "Prisoners! Fie, what a word among friends? Let us rather say guests of honor. If I give you a guard it is as a precaution, to make sure that no rash peon makes the mistake of injuring you as an enemy."

"We understand," Threewit answered. "But I'll just tell you one thing, major. Our friends know where we are, and Uncle Sam has a long arm. It will reach easily to Noche Buena."

"So, señor? Perhaps. Maybe. Who knows? Accidents happen — regrettable ones. A thousand apologies to your Uncle Sam. Oh, yes! Ver' sorry. Too late to mend, but then have we not shot the foolish peon who made the mistake in regard to Señors Farrar and Threewit? Yes, indeed."

Culvera tossed off his genial prophecy with the

politest indifference. The prisoners read in his words a threat, sinister and scarcely veiled.

"You're talking murder, which is absurd," answered Threewit. "We've done no harm to you or General Pasquale. We came here by mistake. He'll let us go, of course."

"You sent Yeager down here to spy about those cattle you lost. Now you've come down here buttin' in to see for yourself. I don't expect Pasquale is going to stand for any such thing," broke in Harrison.

Farrar looked the prizefighter straight in the eye.

"You're a liar and you know it, Harrison. Let me tell you something else. You've stood here and cursed Yeager to the limit. Why? Because he's a better man than you are. I don't know just what's happened, but I can see that he has given you the beating of your life. And he did it in fair fight too."

Harrison interrupted with a scream of rage. "I'll cave his head in when we meet sure as he's a foot high."

"No, you won't. He's got your goat. What I've got to say about Yeager is this. If you put over any of your sculduggery on us, he'll wipe you off the map no matter in what lonesome hole you hide. Just stick a pin in that."

The bully moved slowly toward Farrar. His

head had sunk down and his shoulders fallen to the gorilla hunch.

"You've said enough — too much, damn you," he roared.

With catlike swiftness Culvera sprang from where he sat, flung his weight low at the furious man from an angle, and tipped him from his feet so that he fell staggering into a chair.

"None of that, amigo," said the Mexican curtly. "These gentlemen are guests of General Pasquale. Till he passes judgment they shall be treated with ver' much courtesy."

Panting heavily, Harrison glared at him. Some day he intended to take a fall out of this supercilious young Spanish aristocrat, but just now he was not equal to the task. He mumbled incoherent threats.

"I don't quite catch your remarks. Is it that they are to my address, Señor Harrison?" asked the young officer silkily.

Heavily Harrison rose and passed from the room without looking at any of them. For the present he was beaten and he knew it.

The Mexican smiled confidentially at his prisoners. "Between friends, it's ver' devilish unpleasant to do business with such a — what you call — ruffian. But ver' necessar'. Oh, yes! Quite so."

"Depends on one's business, I expect," replied Farrar.

"You have said it, señor. A patriot can't be too particulair. He uses the tools that come to his hands. But pardon! My tongue is like a woman's. It runs away with time."

He called the guard and had the prisoners removed. They were put in the same adobe hut where Yeager had been confined a few days earlier.

Threewit lit a cigar and paced up and down gloomily. "This is a hell of a fix we're in. Before we get out of here the old man will be hollering his head off for that 'Retreat of the Bandits' three-reeler."

The camera man laughed ruefully. "I ain't worrying any about the old man. He's back there safe in little old New York. It's Frank Farrar that's on my mind. How is he going to get out of here?"

The director stopped, took the cigar from his mouth, and looked across questioningly at him.

"You don't really think Pasquale will hurt us, do you?"

"No; not unless the breaks go against us. I don't reckon Pasquale has anything much against Yeager any more than he has against us. Of course, Harrison will do his darndest to make him sore at us. Notice how he tried to put it over that we had come about that bunch of cattle he stole?"

"Sure I did. But it is not likely that Harrison is ace high in this pack. What I'm afraid of is that the old general will soak us for a ransom. He's nothing but an outlaw, anyhow."

Within the hour they were taken before Pasquale. He was still covered with the dust of travel. His riding-gloves lay on the table where he had tossed them. His soft white hat was on his head. As rapidly as possible he was devouring a chicken dinner.

It was his discourteous whim to keep them waiting in the back of the room until he had finished. They were offered no seats, but stood against the wall under the eye of the guard who had brought them.

The general finished his bottle of wine before he turned savagely upon them.

"You are friends of the Gringo Yeager. Not so?" he accused.

It was too late for a denial now. Threewit admitted the charge.

"So. Maldito! What are you doing here? I've had enough of you Yankees!" he exploded.

Before Threewit had more than begun his explanations he brushed aside the director's words.

"This Yeager is a devil. Did he not crawl up on me unexpect' and strike me here with an axe?" He touched the back of his head, across which a wide bandage ran. "Be sure I will cut his heart

out some day. Gabriel Pasquale has said it. And you — you come here to spy what we have. You claim my cattle. Am I a fool that I do not know?"

"We are sorry —"

The Mexican struck the table with his hairy brown fist so that the dishes rang. "Sorry! Jesu Cristo! In good time I shall see to that. If I do not lay hands upon this devil Yeager, his friends will do instead. Am I one to be laughed at by Gringos?"

Threewit spoke as firmly as he could, though the fear of this big, unshaven savage was in his heart. "We are not spies, general. We were brought here by the lie that Yeager lay here dying and had sent for us. In no way have we harmed you. Before you go too far, remember that our Government will not tolerate any foul play. We are not stray sheepherders. Our friends are close to the President. They have his ear and —"

Pasquale leaned forward and snapped his fingers in the face of Threewit. "That for your President and your Government. Pouf! I snap my fingers. I spit on them. Mexico for the Mexicans. To the devil with all foreigners."

He nodded to the guard. "Away with them!"

As they left they could hear him roaring for another bottle.

CHAPTER XVII

PEDRO CABENZA

THE Patriotic Legion of the Northern States was drinking mescal and gambling for the paper money Pasquale had issued and rolling about in the dust with joyous whoops from each squirming mass. It was a happy Legion, though a dirty one. It let its chief do all the worrying about how it was to be fed and transported. Cheerfully it went its ragged way, eating, drinking, sleeping, card-playing, rolling in the dust of its friendly wrestling. What matter that many members of the Legion were barefoot, that its horses were scarecrows, that gunnysacks and ends of wires from baled hay and bits of frazzled rope all made contribution to the saddles and bridles of the cavalry! Was Pasquale not going to take them straight to Mexico City, where all of them would be made rich at the expense of the accursed Federals who had trodden upon the face of the poor? Caramba! Soon now the devil would have his own.

A burro appeared at one end of the hot and dusty street. Beside the burro limped a man, occasionally beating the animal on the rump with a switch he carried. The Legion took a languid

interest. This was some farmer from a hill valley bringing supplies to sell to the patriotic army. Would his wares turn out to be mescal or vegetables or perhaps a leggy steer that he had butchered?

As he drew nearer it was to be seen that a crate hung from one side of the burro. In it were chickens. Balancing this, on the other side, were two gunnysacks. Through a hole in one of these pushed the green face of a cabbage. Interest in the new arrival declined. The chickens would go to the quarters of the officers, and cabbage was an old story.

When the burro was opposite the corral one of the sacks gave way with a rip. From out of the hole poured a stream of apples upon the dusty road. That part of the Legion which was nearest pounced upon the fruit with shouts of laughter. The owner tried to fight the half-grown soldiers from his property. He might as well have tried to sweep back an ocean tide with a broom. In ten seconds every apple had been gleaned from the dust. Within thirty more everything but the cores had gone to feed the Legion.

The vendor of food wailed and flung imprecations at his laughing tormentors. He cursed them fluently and shook a dirty brown fist at the circle of troopers. He threatened to tell Pasquale what they had done.

A harsh voice interrupted him. "What is it you will tell Pasquale?"

The army began to melt unobtrusively away. The general himself, accompanied by Major Ochampa, sat in the saddle and scowled at the farmer. The latter told his story, almost in tears. This was all he had, these chicken, cabbages, and apples. He had brought them down to sell and was going to enlist. His Excellency would understand that he, Pedro Cabenza, was a patriot, but, behold! he had been robbed.

He was at any rate a very ragged patriot. There was a hole in his cotton trousers through which four inches of coffee-colored leg showed. His shoes were in the last stages. The hat he doffed was an extremely ventilated one.

Pasquale passed judgment instantly. It would never do for word to get out that those bringing supplies to feed his army were not paid fairly.

"Buy the chickens and the cabbage, Ochampa. Pay the man for his apples. Enlist him and find him a mount."

He rode away, leaving his subordinate to deal with the details. Major Ochampa was the paymaster for the army as well as Secretary of the Treasury for the Government of which Pasquale was the chief. His name was on the very much-depreciated currency the insurgents had issued.

Until recently Ochampa had been a small

farmer himself. He bargained shrewdly for the supplies, but in Cabenza he found a match. The man haggled to the last cent and then called on Heaven to witness that he had practically given away the goods for nothing. But when the sergeant led him away to enlist he was beaming at the bargain he had made.

Cabenza became at once an unobtrusive unit in the army. He could lie for hours and bask in the sunshine with the patient content of the Mexican peon. He could eat frijoles and tortillas week in and week out, offering no complaint at the monotony of his diet. He was as lazy, as hopeful, and as unambitious as several thousand other riders of the Legion. Nobody paid the least attention to him except to require of him the not very arduous duties of camp service. Presently Pasquale would move south and renew the campaign. Meanwhile his troopers had an indolent, easy time of it.

On the evening of the day after his enlistment Pedro Cabenza strolled across toward the prison where he had been told two Americans were held captive. Two guards sat outside in front of the door and gossiped. Cabenza, moved apparently by a desire for companionship, indifferently drifted toward them. He sat down. Presently he produced a bottle furtively. All three drank, to good health, to the success of the revolution, a

third time to the day when they should march victorious into the great city in the south.

They became exhilarated. Cabenza found it necessary to work off his excitement upon the prisoners. He stood on tiptoe, holding the window bars in his hands, and jeered at the men within.

"Ho, ho, Gringos! May the devil fly away with you! Food for powder — food for powder! Some fine morning the general will give orders and — we shall bury you in the sand by the river. Not so?" he scoffed in his own language.

One of the Americans within drew near the window.

"Listen," he said. "Do you want to earn some money — ten — twenty — one hundred dollars in gold? Will you take a letter for me to Los Robles?"

"No. The general would skin me alive. I spit upon your offer. I throw dirt upon you."

Cabenza stooped, in his hand scooped up some dust from the ground, and flung it between the bars.

One of the guards pulled him back savagely.

"Icabron! Know you not the orders of the general? None are to talk with the Gringos. Away, fool! Because of the drink Pablo and I will forget. Away!"

Cabenza showed a face ludicrously terror-

stricken. The punishments of Pasquale were notoriously severe. If it were known he had broken the command he would at least be beaten with whips.

"I did not know. I did not know," he explained humbly, thrusting the liquor bottle at one of them. "Here, compañero, drink and forget that I have spoken."

He turned and scurried away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII

HARRISON OVERPLAYS HIS HAND

THROUGH the barred window Farrar watched the guard drag Cabenza back. He was very despondent. They had been prisoners now nearly a week and could see no termination of their jail sentence in sight. The food given them was wretched. They were anxious, dirty, and unkempt. Though he would not admit it even to himself, the camera man was oppressed by the shadow of a possible impending fate. The whim of a tyrant regardless of human life might at any hour send them to a firing squad.

Threewit sat gloomily on the stool, elbows on knees and chin resting on his fists. He could have wept for himself almost without shame. For forty-five years he had gone his safe way, a policeman always within call. Not once had life in the raw reached out and gripped him. Not once had he faced the stark probability of sudden, violent death. Clubs and after-theater suppers and poker and golf had offered him pleasant diversion. And now — a cruel fate had thrown him in the way of a barbarian with no sense of either justice or kindness. He felt himself

too soft of fiber to cope with such elemental forces.

"Look! What is that, Threewit?"

Farrar was pointing to something on the table that gleamed white in the moonlight. He stepped forward and picked it up. The article was a stone around which was wrapped a paper tied by a string.

"The Mexican must have thrown it in with the dirt. It was n't there before," replied the director quickly.

Farrar untied the string and smoothed out the paper, holding it toward the moonlight. "There's writing on it, but I can't make it out. Strike a match for me."

His companion struck on his trousers a match and the camera man read by its glowing flame.

> Keep a stiff upper lip. Cactus Center is on the job. Don't know when my chance will come, but I'm looking for it. *Chew this up.*
>
> S. Y.

Farrar gave a subdued whoop of joy. "It's old Steve. He has n't forgotten us, good old boy. I'll bet he has got something up his sleeve."

"Hope that greaser does n't give us away to Pasquale or Harrison."

"He won't. Trust Cactus Center. He's bridle-wise, that lad is. I feel a lot better just to know he has got us on his mind."

"What do you suppose he is planning?"

"Don't know. Of course he has to lie low. But he pulled off his own getaway and I'll back him to figure out ours." The camera man was nothing if not a loyal admirer of the range-rider.

They talked in whispers, eager and excited with the possibility of rescue that had come. Somehow, of all the men they had known, they banked more on Steve Yeager in such an emergency than any other. It was not alone his physical vigor, though that counted, since it gave him so complete a mastery over himself. Farrar had seen him once stripped in a swimming-pool and been stirred to wonder. Beneath the satiny skin the muscles moved in ripples. The biceps crawled back and forth like living things, beautiful in the graceful flow of their movement. Whatever he had done had been done easily, apparently without effort. This reserve power was something more than a combination of bone and sinew and flesh. It was a product of the spirit, a moral force to be reckoned with. It helped to make impossible things easy of accomplishment.

The panic of Cabenza vanished as soon as he was out of sight of the guards. As he turned down

toward the sandy river-bed a little smile lay in his eyes.

From the place where it was buried beneath the root of a cottonwood, he dug out a bandanna handkerchief containing several bottles, little brushes, and a looking-glass. Sitting there in the moonlight, he worked busily renewing the tints of his hands and face and also of the coffee-colored patch of skin that peeped through his torn trouser leg.

This done, he sauntered back to the little town and down the adobe street. A horseman cantered up to the headquarters of the general just as Pasquale stepped out with Culvera. The latter snapped his fingers toward Cabenza and that trooper ran forward.

"Hold the horse," ordered the officer in Mexican.

Cabenza relieved the messenger, who stepped forward and delivered what had been given him to say. The hearing of the man holding the horse was acute and he listened intently.

"Señor Harrison sends greeting to the general. He is in touch with the play-actor Lennox and hopes soon to get the Gringo Yeager. If Lennox plays false . . ."

The words ran into a murmer and Cabenza could hear no more.

The messenger was dismissed. Cabenza

stooped to tie a loose lace in his shoe. Pasquale and Culvera passed back from the end of the porch into the house. As they went the trooper heard another stray fragment in the voice of the general.

"If Harrison crosses the line after him at night . . ."

That was all, but it told Cabenza that Harrison was negotiating with Lennox for the delivery of Yeager in exchange for Threewit and Farrar. The leading man was, of course, playing for time until Steve, under the guise of Cabenza, could arrange to win the freedom of the prisoners.

This would take time, for success would depend upon several dove-tailing factors. To attempt a rescue and to fail would be practically to sign the death-warrant of Farrar and Threewit.

Yeager, alias Cabenza, returned to the stable where he and a score of patriots of the Northern Legion had sleeping-quarters. He would much have preferred to take his blankets out into the pure night air and to bed under the stars. But he was playing his part thoroughly. He could not afford to be nice or scrupulous, for fear of calling special attention to himself.

As for the peons beside him, they snored peacefully without regard to the lack of cleanliness of their bedroom. The first day of his arrival Yeager had knocked a hole in the flimsy wall and

had given it out as the result of a chance kick of a bronco. This served to let air into a building which had no other means of ventilation. It also allowed some small percentage of the various concentrated odors to escape.

The Arizonian was a light sleeper. But like some men in perfect trim he had the faculty of going to sleep whenever he desired. Often he had taken a nap in the saddle while night-herding. Fatigued from eighteen hours of wrestling the cattle to safety through a bitter storm, he had learned to fall easily into rest the instant his head hit the pillow. It was a heritage that had come to him from his rugged, outdoor life. So he slept now, a gentle, untroubled slumber, until daylight sifted through the hole in the wall at his side.

He was on duty that day herding the remuda, and it was not until late afternoon that he returned to camp. From a distance, dropping down into the draw which formed the location of the town, he saw a dust cloud moving down the street. At the apex of it rode a little bunch of travelers, evidently just in from the desert. Incuriously his eyes watched the party as it moved toward the headquarters of Pasquale. Some impulse led him to put his scarecrow of a pony at a canter.

The party reached the house of Pasquale and the two leaders dismounted. Yeager was still at some distance, but he had an uncertain impression

that one of them was a woman. They stood on the porch talking. The larger one seemed to be overruling the protest of the other, so far as Steve could tell at that distance. The two passed together into the house.

It was not at all unusual for women to go into that house, according to the camp-fire stories that were whispered in the army. Pasquale was an unmoral old barbarian. If he liked women and wine the Legion made no complaint. The women were either camp-followers or visitors from the nearest town. In either case they were not of a sort whose reputation was likely to suffer.

Yeager cooked his simple supper and ate it. He sat down with his back to an adobe wall and rolled a cigarette. The peons, loafing in the cool of the evening, naturally fell into gossip. Steve, intent on his own thoughts, did not hear what was said until a word snatched him out of his indifference. The word was the name of Harrison.

"This afternoon?" asked one.

"Not an hour ago."

"Brought a woman with him, Pablo says," said a third indifferently.

"Yes." The first speaker laughed with an implication he did not care to express.

One of the others leaned forward and spoke in a lower tone. "This Harrison promised the general to bring back with him the Gringo Yeager.

Old Gabriel is crazy to get the Yankee devil in his hands. Not so? Harrison brings him a woman instead to soften his bad temper, maybe."

The American gave no sign of interest. His fingers finished rolling the cigarette. Not another muscle of the inert body moved.

"A white woman this time, Pablo says."

The first speaker shrugged. "Look you, brother. All is grist that comes to the mill of Gabriel. As for these Gringo women" — He whispered a bit of slander that brought the blood to the face of Steve.

The peons guffawed with delight. This kind of joke was adapted both to their prejudices and their lack of intelligence. They were as ignorant of the world as children, fully as gay, irresponsible, and kindhearted. But they had, too, a capacity for cruelty and frank sensuousness that belongs only to the childhood of a race.

Presently Yeager arose, yawned, and drifted inconspicuously toward the stable that had been converted into a bedroom by the simple process of throwing a lot of blankets on the floor. But as soon as he was out of sight, Steve doubled across the road into the alley that ran back of the house where Pasquale was putting up.

The news about Harrison's return was disquieting. Ever since Yeager's second arrival at Noche Buena he had been gone. What did his

appearance now mean? Who was the American woman he had brought back with him? Steve was inclined to think she was probably some one of the man's dubious acquaintances from Arixico. But of this he intended to make sure.

He passed quietly up the alley and into the yard back of the big house the insurgent general had appropriated for his headquarters. A light was shining from one of the back upper rooms. From it, too, there came faintly the sound of a voice, high and frightened, in which sobs and hysteria struggled.

By means of a post the Arizonian climbed to the top of the little back porch. Leaning as far as he could toward the window of the lighted room, he could see Pasquale and Harrison. The woman, whoever she might be, was in the corner of the room beyond his vision. The prize-fighter showed both in face and manner a certain stiff sullenness. He was insisting upon some point to which there was determined opposition. As the general turned half toward him once, the range-rider saw in his little black eyes an alert and greedy cunning he did not understand.

The woman broke out into violent protest.

"I won't do it. I won't. If you are a liberator, as they say you are, you won't let him force me to it, general, will you?"

At the sound of that voice Yeager's heart

jumped. He would have known it among ten thousand. Little beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. The primitive instinct to kill seared across his brain and left him for the moment dizzy and trembling.

There was a grin on Pasquale's ugly mug. His tobacco-stained teeth showed behind the lifted lips.

"If young ladies will insist on running away with officers of mine —"

"I did n't. Ask the men. I fought. See where I bit his hand," she protested, fighting against hysterical fears.

"So? But Señor Harrison says you were engaged to him."

"I hate him. I've found him out. I'd rather die than —"

Yeager caught the arm fling that concluded her sentence of passionate protest.

Pasquale, little black eyes twinkling, shrugged broad shoulders and turned to Harrison.

"You see. The lady has changed her mind, señor. What will you?"

"What's that got to do with it? She's mine. Send for a priest and have us married," the other man demanded bluntly.

"Not so fast, amigo," remonstrated Pasquale softly. "Give her time — a few days — quien sabe? — she may change her mind again."

Harrison choked on his anger. He was suspicious of this suavity, of this sudden respect for a girl's wishes. Since when had the old despot become so scrupulous as to risk offending one who had served him a good deal and might aid him in more serious matters? The prizefighter could guess only one reason for the general's attitude. His jealousy began to smoke at once.

"She can change her mind afterward just as well. If we're married now, then I'm sure of her," the prizefighter insisted doggedly.

Impulsively the girl swept into that part of the room within the view of Steve. She knelt in front of Pasquale and caught at his hand.

"Send me home — back to my mother. I'm only a girl. You don't make war on girls, do you?" she pleaded.

Had she only known it, the very sweetness of her troubled youth, the shadows under the starry eyes edging the wild-rose cheeks, the allure of her lines and soft flesh, fought potently against her desire for a safe-conduct home. The greedy, treacherous little eyes of the insurgent chief glittered.

He shook his head. "No, señorita. That is not possible. But you shall stay here — under the protection of Gabriel Pasquale himself. You shall have choice — Señor Harrison if you wish, another if you prefer it so. Take time. Perhaps —

who knows?" He smiled and bowed with the gallantry of a bear as he kissed her hand.

"No — no. I want to go home," she sobbed.

"Young ladies don't always know what is best for them. Behold, we shall marry you to a soldier, one of rank. From the general down, you shall have choice," Pasquale promised largely.

Harrison scowled. He did not at all like the turn things were taking. "Not as long as I'm alive," he said savagely. "She's mine, I tell you."

The Mexican looked directly at him with a face as hard as jade. "So you don't expect to live long, señor. Is that it? We shall all mourn. Yes, indeed." He turned decisively to the white-faced girl. "Go to sleep, muchacha. To-morrow we shall talk. Gabriel Pasquale is your friend. All shall be well with you. None shall insult you on peril of his life. Buenos!"

With a gesture of his hand he pointed the door to Harrison.

The eyes of the two men clashed stormily. It was those of the American that finally gave way sulkily. Pasquale had power to enforce his commands and the other knew he would not hesitate to use it.

The prizefighter slouched out of the room with the general at his heels.

With a little gesture that betrayed the despair

of her sick heart the girl turned and flung herself face down on the bed. Sobs shook her slender body. Her fingers clutched unconsciously at the rough weave of the blanket upon which she lay.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TEXAN

STEVE tapped gently on the window pane with the ball of his middle finger. Instantly the sobbing was interrupted. The black head of hair lifted from the pillow to listen the better. He could guess how fearfully the heart of the girl was beating.

Again he tapped on the glass. With a lithe twist of her body the girl sat up on the bed. She waited tensely for a repetition of the sound, not quite sure from where it had come.

Her questing eyes found at last the source of it, a warning forefinger close to the pane that seemed to urge for silence. Rising, she moved slowly to the window, uneasy, doubtful, yet with hope beginning to stir at her heart. She formed a cup for her eyes with her palms so as to hold back the light while she peered through the glass into the darkness without.

Over to the left she made out the contour of a face, a brown Mexican face with quick, eager eyes that spoke comfort to her. Her first thought was that it belonged to a friend. Hard on the heels of that she gave a little cry of joy

and began with trembling fingers to raise the window.

"Steve!" she cried, laughing and crying together.

And as soon as she had adjusted the window she caught his hand between both of hers and pressed it hard. Steve was here. He would save her as he had before. She was all right now.

"Ruth! Little Ruth!" he cried softly, in a whisper.

"Did you hear? Do you know?" she asked.

"Only that he brought you here, the hellhound, and that Pasquale —"

He stopped, his sentence unfinished. There was no need to alarm her about that old philanderer. Time enough for that if she scratched the surface and found the savage beneath.

" — Won't let me go home," she finished for him.

"But what are you doing here? How did Harrison trap you?"

"I had been strolling with Daisy Ellington after supper. It was not late — hardly dark yet. She stopped at the hotel to talk with Miss Winters and I started to walk home alone. I took the short cut across the empty block just below Brinker's. He was waiting among the cottonwoods there — he and two Mexicans. As soon as he stepped into the light I was afraid."

"Why did n't you cry out?"

"I did n't like to make a scene about nothing. And after that first moment I had no time. He caught hold of me and put his hand across my mouth. Horses were there ready saddled. He lifted me in front of him and kept my mouth covered till we were clear of the town. It did n't matter how much I screamed when we had reached the desert."

"I did n't think even Harrison had the nerve to kidnap an Arizona girl and bring her across the line. If he had happened to meet a bunch of cowpunchers —"

"He did n't start after me. It was you he wanted. But he found out you were n't in town and took me instead. All the way down he talked about you — boasted how he would marry me in spite of you and how he would take you and have Pasquale flay you alive."

Yeager lifted a warning finger. "Remember you have a friend here. Good-night."

He lowered himself quickly, slid down the porch post, and disappeared into the darkness almost instantly.

Ruth heard voices. One gave commands, the others answered mildly with "Si, Excellency." Dim figures moved about below, one heavy, bulky, dominating. He gestured, snapped out curt directions, and presently vanished. Two

guards were left. They paced up and down beneath her window. She understood that Pasquale was providing against any chance of escape. Half an hour ago she would have shuddered. Now she could even smile faintly at his precautions. Steve would evade them when the right time came.

Her confidence in him, since it looked only to the results, was greater than that he felt in his own power. The range-rider saw the difficulties before him. He was alone in a camp of wild, ignorant natives who moved at the nod of Pasquale. When he let himself think of Ruth as a prisoner at the mercy of that savage old outlaw's whim, the heart of Steve failed him. What could one man do against so many?

He felt that she was perfectly safe for the present, but Yeager found it impossible to sleep in the stable. Taking his blankets with him, he slipped noiselessly out to the cottonwood clump back of Pasquale's headquarters. Here, at least, he could see the light in her window and be sure that all was well with her.

As he moved noiselessly from one tree to another which gave a better view of the window, Steve stumbled against the prostrate body of a man.

Some one ripped out a sullen oath and a grip of steel caught at the ankle of the cowpuncher.

Taken by surprise, Yeager was dragged to the ground.

"What are you doing here?" demanded a voice Steve recognized instantly as belonging to Harrison.

The prisoner made no resistance. He ran into a patter of frightened, apologetic Spanish.

"What's your name?"

"Pedro Cabenza, señor," replied the owner of that name. "It is so hot in the stable. So I bring my blankets here and sleep."

"Hmp!" Harrison took time for reflection. "Know where I put up?"

"Si, señor."

The prizefighter gave him a dollar. "Stay here. Keep an eye on that lighted window upstairs. If anything happens — if you hear a noise — if a woman screams, come and knock me up right away. Understand?"

The docile Cabenza repeated his instructions like a parrot.

"Good enough," Harrison nodded. "I'll give you another dollar when you come. But don't wake me for nothing."

"No, señor."

"And you'd better keep your mouth shut unless you want your head beat off," advised the white man as he left.

The one who had given his name as Cabenza

grinned to himself. He was now Harrison's hired watcher. Both of them were in league to frustrate any deviltry on the part of Pasquale. He wondered what the prizefighter would give to know that he had his enemy so wholly in his power, that he had only to lay hands on him and cry out to doom him to a painful and a violent death.

Yeager dozed and wakened and dozed again. Always when he looked the light was still burning. Toward morning he saw the figure of Ruth in the window. When she turned away the light went out. He judged she had put her anxieties from her and given herself to sleep at last. But not until the camp began to stir with the renewal of life for another day did he leave his post and return to the stable.

During the morning he slept under a cottonwood and made up arrears of rest lost while on guard. About noon Harrison came down the street and stopped at sight of him. The man was livid with anger. Yeager could guess the reason. He had spent a stormy ten minutes with old Pasquale demanding his rights and had issued from the encounter without profit. From the place where Steve was sitting he had heard the high, excited voices. It had occurred to him that the protest of Harrison had gone about as far as it could be safely carried, for Gabriel was both a ruthless and a hot-tempered despot.

Harrison sat down sullenly without speaking and stared straight in front of him. He was boiling with impotent fury. Pasquale had the whip hand and meant to carry things his own way. Of that he no longer had any doubt. In bringing Ruth to Noche Buena he had made a great mistake.

"Do you want to make some money, you — what's your name?" he presently rasped out.

Yeager answered with the universal formula of the land. "Si, señor. And my name is Cabenza — Pedro Cabenza."

The prizefighter glanced warily around, then lowered his voice. "I mean a lot of money — twenty dollars, maybe."

"Gold?" asked the peon, wide-eyed.

"Gold. How far would you go to earn that much?"

"A long way, señor."

Harrison caught him by the wrist with a grip that drove the blood back. "Listen, Cabenza. *Would you go as far as the camp of Garcia Farrugia?*" The close-gripped, salient jaw was thrust forward. Black eyes blazed from a set, snarling face.

So, after all, the man was trafficking with the Federal governor all the time just as he was with the Constitutionalists. Yeager had once or twice suspected as much.

"To the camp of Governor Farrugia," gasped Cabenza. "But — what for, señor?"

"To carry him a letter. Never mind what for. You will get your pay. Is it not enough?"

"And — Pasquale?"

"Need never know. You can slip away this afternoon and be back by to-morrow night."

Cabenza shook his head regretfully. "No. I am one of the horse wranglers. My boss would miss me if I was not here. I cannot go."

The other man swore. At the same time he recognized the argument as effective. He must find a messenger who could absent himself without stirring up questions.

"Then keep your mouth clamped," ordered Harrison. "I may be able to use you here. Anyhow, I want you to be ready to help if I need you."

He slipped a dollar into the brown palm of the peon and left him.

Steve looked after him with narrowed eyes. "Mr. Harrison is liable to bump into trouble if he don't look out. He's gone crazy with the heat, looks like. First thing, he'll pick on the wrong greaser and Mr. Messenger will take the letter to Pasquale instead of Farrugia. That's about what'll happen."

Something else happened first, however, that distracted the attention of Mr. Yeager, alias

Cabenza, from this regrettable possibility. A man rode into camp, followed by a Mexican leading a pack-horse. The first rider was straight, tall, and wide-shouldered; also he was deep-chested and lean-loined, forty-five or thereabout, and had "Texan" written all over his weather-beaten face and costume. At sight of him Steve gave a silent whoop of joy. A white man had come to Noche Buena, a Texan (he was ready to swear), and he wore his big serviceable six-guns low. Also, he carried on his face and in his bearing the look of reckless competence that comes only from death faced in the open fearlessly and often.

Inside of five minutes Cabenza had gathered information as follows: Adam Holcomb was a soldier of fortune who had fought all over South America and Mexico. During the Spanish War he had been a Rough Rider in Cuba and later had been a volunteer officer in the Philippines. The army routine had no attraction for him. What he liked was actual fighting. So the outbreak of the Revolution had drawn him across the border, where he had done much to lick the Constitutionalist troops into shape. Now he had come to Noche Buena to teach the artillery of the Legion how to shoot straight, after which they would all march south and take the great city with the golden gates. Personally this Gringo was a devil, of course, but Pasquale was a prince

of devils whose business it was to keep all lesser ones in order. So, in the Spanish equivalent of our American slang, they should worry. Thus a comrade explained the Texan and his presence to Pedro.

Cabenza contrived to be in the way when some one was wanted to fill the water-jug of Holcomb. Ochampa, who for the moment had charge of the artillery officer, swooped down upon the peon and put him temporarily at the service of his guest to fetch and carry at his orders. So Pedro unpacked the belongings of the American officer and prepared what had to serve as the substitute for a bath. He was so adept at this that the captain privately decided to requisition him for his servant.

Having finished this and laid out towels, Cabenza brushed the boots of the captain outside while that gentleman splashed within the cabin. He chose the time while he was arranging the shaving-outfit on the table to convey a piece of information to Holcomb.

"What's that? An American woman — held captive at his house by Pasquale," repeated the soldier of fortune, astonished.

"A girl, not a woman. About eighteen, maybe," supplemented Cabenza, in Mexican, of course.

"A woman from the street, I reckon. And if

you look into it you'll find she's here of her own free will."

Steve was now stropping a razor. His back was toward the officer, but without turning he could see him by looking in the glass.

"You've got the wrong steer, captain. She's as straight a girl as ever lived," answered Yeager in perfectly good English.

Holcomb sat up straight. "Turn round, my man," he ordered crisply.

The range-rider did as he was told. The light, blue-gray eyes of the officer bored into his.

"You're no Mexican," charged the Texan.

"No. Arizona is where I hang up my hat."

"What are you, then? A spy?"

"I reckon, maybeso." Steve admitted the thrust lightly. "Got time to hear all about it, captain?"

"Go ahead."

The range-rider told it, the whole story, so far as it could be related by him. Such details as his modesty omitted Holcomb's imagination was easily able to supply.

The Texan paced up and down the room with the long, light, military stride.

"And you say Pasquale has been with her all day — that he ate lunch with her and is riding with her now?"

"Yes. Just watch his eyes when he looks at

her if you're in doubt about the old villain. There's a tiger look in them, and something else that's worse." Yeager chanced to glance out of the window. "Here they come now back from their ride. Why not meet them as they alight?"

The captain reached for his hat and led the way down the street. Cabenza followed him, a step or two in the rear. They reached headquarters just as Pasquale lifted Ruth from the saddle. He held her for a moment in his strong arms and grinned down at her frightened, fascinated eyes.

"Adios, chatita!" he murmured, his little eyes dancing with triumph.

She fled from him into the house, terror giving speed to her limbs.

Upon Holcomb the dictator turned eyes that had grown cold and harsh again.

"Welcome, captain, welcome, to the Northern Legion," he said brusquely, offering a gauntleted hand.

They went into the house together, Pasquale's arm across the shoulder of the Texan.

"Dios, I'm glad to see you, captain," the insurgent chief ran on quickly. "This riff-raff of mine can't hit a hillside. Hammer the artillery into shape and I'll say gracias."

"Yes. I see you have a countrywoman of mine visiting you," the American said quietly.

"From Arizona." The Mexican laughed harshly. "We should get together more, your country and mine. We should bind the States and the Republic together by closer ties. A man without a wife is but a half man. Captain, I shall marry."

It was common knowledge of the camp that in his outlaw days Pasquale had a wife and family. The sons were grown up now. The rumor ran that the wife had found a more congenial mate and was separated from Gabriel by common agreement. Holcomb made no reference to this free-and-easy arrangement.

"Congratulations, general. Is the lady some high-born señorita?"

"The lady you have just seen is my choice — the young woman from Arizona," answered Pasquale, flashing from under his heavy grizzled brows a sharp, questioning look at the Texan.

"Indeed! I shall be happy to meet the lady and wish her joy," replied Holcomb lightly.

"You shall, captain. She's a little reluctant yet, but Gabriel has a way of overcoming that. I shall be married on Saturday."

"Ah!"

The face of the Texan had as much expression as a piece of flint. Pasquale, watching him warily, wondered what he was thinking behind those hard, steel-gray eyes.

CHAPTER XX

NEAR THE END OF HIS TRAIL

HARRISON strode up and down the room furiously. "Who in Mexico is this Pasquale?" he demanded, and then answered his own question: "Scum of the earth, a peon whipped for stealing whiskey, a hill robber and murderer. In my country they'd take the scoundrel and hang him by the neck."

"True, amigo, — all true," assented Culvera suavely, examining his cigarette as he spoke. "But it is well to remember that walls have ears, and therefore to whisper — when one speaks of Gabriel."

"I'm not afraid of him," boasted the American, but his voice fell.

"I am," differed Culvera frankly. "Ramon is fond of Ramon, so he chooses a safe time to pay his debts — and he does not advertise in advance that he is going to settle."

"Bah! You sit still and do nothing. But I — By God! I'll not stand it. He has given it out he will be married Saturday. We'll see about that. Maybe he'll be buried that day instead."

The dark eyes of the Mexican swept him with

a sidelong glance, If he could do it without incurring responsibility himself, he was very willing to spur on the fierce passion of this man.

"Be careful, señor. Pasquale is dangerous."

"You know he is dangerous — to Ramon Culvera. Why don't you strike and be done with it?"

"The time is not ripe. Some day — perhaps —" He let a shrug of his shoulders finish the sentence for him.

"It's always mañana with you Mexicans," sneered Harrison with a savage lift of the lip. "You want to play it safe all the time. Why don't you take a chance?"

"I play my own cards, señor," returned Ramon equably.

"You play 'em darned close to your stomach. Me, I go out on a limb oncet in a while."

"Be sure you don't stay out there — at the end of a rope," smiled the Mexican.

"They have n't grown the hemp yet that will hang Chad Harrison." The prizefighter leaned toward him, eyes shining. "If I pull it off and make my getaway — what then? Will you send the girl to me, wherever I am?"

"You mean, if you —"

"— Give Pasquale what's been coming to him for a long time."

The eyes of Culvera were slits of light. His

face was a brown mask that covered an alert and wary attention.

"I did n't hear what you said, amigo. It is better that I should n't. But if I had charge of the army instead of General Pasquale my policy would be different. I would return this Arizona girl to her home."

"To her home!" broke in Harrison harshly.

"To her husband," amended the Mexican significantly, adding after an instant — "who is a good friend of mine."

"You 'll stand pat on that, will you?"

"It would be my purpose to reward my friends — those who have helped the cause — if by any chance command of the Legion should fall to me."

Harrison glared at him suspiciously. "You 're so smooth I don't know whether I can believe you or not. You 'd sell your own father out for the right price."

"I pay my debts, señor — both kinds," suggested the Mexican, unmoved at this outburst.

"See that you do."

"Be sure I shall, amigo," returned Culvera, looking straight at him from narrowed eyes that told nothing.

The prizefighter took another turn up and down the room. He was anxious and harassed as well as driven hard by hatred and jealousy.

"The wolf is having me watched. His orders

are that I'm not to be allowed to leave camp. I don't get any chance to see him alone. If you ask me, I think he's fixing to have me knifed in the dark," Harrison burst out.

"Should n't wonder," agreed the young officer with a pleasant smile. He lived in an atmosphere where such things were not uncommon, and on occasion could take a hand himself.

"Fat lot you care," complained the photoplay actor sullenly. "You would n't lift a hand to save your pardner."

Culvera patted him on the shoulder cheerfully. "What can I do? Do I not live under the shadow myself? Can I tell when the knife will fall on me? He is without bowels of mercy, this son of a thief. But this I know: if you are watched, you must not stay here. Gabriel will be suspicious lest we are plotting something against him. Good luck, amigo."

The heavyweight took away with him a heavy heart. He had reached the stage where his hand was against that of every man. Culvera he did not trust at all out of his sight beyond the point where the interests of the young Mexican were parallel to his. In the whole camp he had no friend, not even the girl for whom he fought. As for Pasquale, Harrison had told the truth. He believed the general had doomed him. Unless he struck first, he was a lost man. Why had he been

fool enough to boast to the old scoundrel what he would do? His temper had robbed him of the chance to kill and then escape.

He passed down the street toward the river. A dozen boys and young men sat in the shadow of the adobe wall that fronted the road opposite one of the corrals. It chanced that Harrison dropped his handkerchief at this point and stooped to pick it up.

Thirty minutes later a barefooted youth came down to the river carrying an olla for water. Harrison lay sleeping under a cottonwood that edged the trail. One arm was outstretched so that the closed fist lay almost across the path.

The soldier boy whistled gayly as he walked. Oddly enough, just as he reached the sleeping Gringo, the outflung arm lifted abruptly from the ground for an inch or two. A little package shot four feet up into the air and was caught deftly by the barefoot trooper as it descended.

The lips of Harrison barely moved. "Ride to-night, Enrique. Colonel Farrugia will also reward you well."

"Si, señor," nodded Enrique, and went on his way.

The face of the boy was toward the camp on the return journey. The American was still fast asleep. The lad went whistling past him without any sign of recognition.

Several times during the next hour Harrison took a long pull from a bottle he carried in his coat pocket. After a time he rose and walked heavily down the main street of the village until he came to the house where Captain Holcomb had been put up.

The Texan was sitting on his porch smoking a pipe. Behind him, a few feet away, Cabenza was cleaning a rifle for his new master.

"I wanta talk to you about something, Captain Holcomb," announced the film actor.

The soldier looked at him steadily. "Go to it," he ordered curtly.

"This is private business."

Holcomb did not turn his head or raise his voice. "Pedro, vamos."

The feet of Cabenza could be heard hitting the dust as he vanished around the corner of the house.

Without beating around the bush Harrison came to his subject. He jerked a thumb over his right shoulder.

"It's that girl up at the house there I want to talk about."

"What about her?"

"He's got no business keeping her there. She's a straight girl."

"Is she?"

"Yes, sir. She is."

"Then why did you bring her here?" Holcomb's question was like the thrust of a sword.

"Because I was a fool."

"Better give things their right names. You were a damned villain."

A dull flush rose to the cheeks of the prize-fighter. "All right. Let it go at that. I guess you're right. What I want to know now is whether you're going to stand for Pasquale's play. He's got one wife already — half a dozen, far as I know. You going to let him put this wedding farce over without a kick?"

"Can I stop it?"

"You can register a roar, can't you?"

"Would it do any good? Did yours?"

"You're different. He needs you to drill this ragged bunch of hoboes he calls an army. Pasquale has a lot of respect for you. He talked a lot about you before you came."

"If you want to know, I've already spoken to him about it."

"What did he say?"

"Gave me to understand that if I'd attend to my business he'd mind his. And I'm going to do it," concluded Holcomb with sharp decision.

"You mean you're going to lie down like a yellow dog and quit, that you'll let this wolf take that lamb and ruin her life! Is that what you mean?"

Holcomb sat forward in his chair, so that his strong, lean, sunburnt face was as close to the other man as possible. "You talk both like a coward and a fool. You brought the girl here against her will. If Pasquale had been willing to let you force her into a marriage with you, I would n't have heard a squeal out of you. But he butted in. He took her from you. Now you come hollering to me, you quitter. Instead of fighting it out to a finish, you run to me. Talk about yellow curs. Faugh!"

"What can I do?" exploded Harrison in a rage. "He has four men watching her room at night now. Every time I move his cursed spies follow me. There are two of them over there now. Pasquale won't even let me see him. He's aimin' to have me killed, I believe."

"Serve you right," the soldier of fortune flung at him as he rose from his chair. "Killing is none too good for your kind. Pity some one did n't stamp you out before you brought that little girl down here to this sink of perdition."

Harrison swallowed down his anger. 'That's all right. I'll stand for it. If I did n't believe it myself, you'd have a heluvatime getting away with such talk. But it goes just as you lay it down. I'm a skunk and all the rest of it. Now, listen! I ain't such a four-flusher as to lay down my hand before I've played it out. See! I'm

not through with Gabriel Pasquale. Watch my smoke. Him and me has n't come to a settlement yet."

"Sounds to me like whiskey talk," answered the Texan scornfully. "Men who do the kind of things you have done don't have the guts to play out a losing game."

"Some do, some don't. By your reputation you're game. All right. Keep your eyes open, captain."

Snarling, the man turned away and walked down the street. Holcomb watched him go. There was something purposeful in the way the heavyweight moved. Perhaps, after all, he would make a fighting finish of it. The captain fervently hoped he would drag old Pasquale down with him before they wiped him off the map. But he knew the betting odds were all the other way.

CHAPTER XXI

A STAGE PREPARED FOR TRAGEDY

Not knowing when his opportunity might come, Harrison kept his horse saddled most of the time. He knew that extra mounted patrols were kept at the ends of the streets and at other points on the mesa surrounding the town, and that he would have to take a chance of being able to run the gauntlet in safety. If luck favored him, he might win past these. For one thing the Mexicans were very poor shots, a little the worst he had ever seen. It might be, too, that he would have darkness in his favor, though he could not count on this.

By Enrique he had sent to Governor Farrugia a map of the camp, giving detailed information as to the number and position of the troops and showing from what direction the camp could best be attacked. In his letter he had urged immediate action, on the ground that a part of the men were absent with Major Ochampa on a foraging expedition. If Farrugia rose to the occasion, he hoped in the confusion of the assault to escape with Ruth.

Meanwhile he waited, and the hours slipped

away. It was now Friday noon, and the wedding was to be Saturday morning.

Four denim-clad troopers and a sergeant marched raggedly down the street and stopped in front of Harrison's adobe house.

"The general wishes to see the señor," explained the sergeant.

The American knew the crucial hour had come. This was the first move of Pasquale in the programme to destroy him. He made no protest, but stepped forward at once, leading his horse by the bridle. The sergeant was a little dubious about the horse, but his orders did not cover the point and he made no objection.

Pasquale was standing in front of his house on the porch, bow legs wide apart and hands crossed behind his back. Harrison stopped directly in front of him. The soldiers moved back a dozen yards.

"Well," demanded the heavyweight.

"I sent for you to explain something to me, sir," said the Mexican general harshly.

"What is it?"

"This letter and map."

Pasquale stepped forward, handed two papers to Harrison, and quickly stepped back till his back was against the wall of the house. Something in his manner stirred the banked suspicions of the American. Already his nerves were keyed

to unusual tension, for he knew the moment of crux was hurrying toward him. Why had the troopers fallen back so far? Why was Pasquale so anxious to put a wide space between himself and his prisoner?

The eyes of the film actor, clouded with doubt of what was about to take place, fell to the papers in his hand. He was looking at the letter and the map he had sent to Governor Farrugia.

Instantly his mind was made up. But as the blue barrel of his revolver flashed into sight there came the simultaneous roar of a volley. The force of it seemed to lift Harrison from his feet. Before his sagging knees had touched the dust the man was dead.

Pasquale drew a forty-five and fired three times into the lax and huddled body. He nodded to the men in the smoke-filled windows upstairs.

"Come down and bury this Gringo dog's body," he ordered.

They trooped down noisily. Pasquale kicked the body carelessly with his toe. "He was a traitor to the cause. The proof is in that paper. Hand it to me, Juan."

The general read the letter aloud. "He would have betrayed us all but for the patriotism of a messenger who would not be bribed. The man deserved death. Not so?"

They shouted approval and added, "Viva Pasquale!" in an enthusiastic roar. Ramon Culvera, who had just arrived on the scene, led the cheering with much vigor.

From every house men, boys, and women poured. The streets filled with noisy patriots. Guns popped here and there to ventilate the energy of their owners. Troopers galloped up and down the road in clouds of dust shooting into the air as they rode. Boys who would have run their legs off to obey a whim of Harrison spat contemptuously upon the face of the "Gringo cabrone."

Drawn by the hubbub, Captain Holcomb hurried from his house, He looked down at the lifeless body four soldiers were carrying away and turned to Pasquale for an explanation.

The general handed him the papers that proved Harrison's guilt. "I have executed a traitor, captain. The dog would have sold us out to Farrugia. Is his punishment not just?"

Holcomb looked the papers over and handed them back to his chief. "He got what was coming to him," he answered quietly.

"I have witnesses to show that he was drawing his revolver to assassinate me at the very moment he was shot. My men were just in time."

"It was fortunate for you your men happened

to be so handy," replied the American officer with just a suggestion of dryness.

For Holcomb knew, just as Yeager did, that the scene had been set by Pasquale for the killing. His men had been stationed in the windows above, unknown to the victim. The heavyweight had been tempted to reach for his weapon by the certainty that he had come to the end of the passage. Doing so, he had given the signal for his own death. Had he failed to do this, the Mexican general would have sprung the trap himself in another minute. Fortunately this had not been necessary. Pasquale was in a position to prove to the United States Government, in case it became inquisitive, that when the man had been confronted with his guilt he had tried to kill him and had been shot down red-handed.

Half an hour later Holcomb came into his house and found Steve cleaning a pair of revolvers. The captain tossed his hat on the bed and sat down.

"Up to us, looks like," he commented.

Yeager nodded silently.

"Harrison had n't a look-in. The old scoundrel had the cards stacked," continued the officer.

"Yep. Chad sat in against a cold deck. He made a big mistake when he let the old man take the play."

"Everything fixed for to-night?"

"Far as it can be. We've just got to take a big chance and trust to luck being with us," answered Steve.

"Guess you'll have to make your own luck. I spoke to Pasquale about a game here to-night. He grabbed at the bait. Said he would bring Culvera and Ochampa. I'll make a long session of it so as to give you all the time you need."

"Better have a boy here to serve the liquor and cigars. If you should hear shooting, and Gabriel gets anxious about it, you can send the boy to find out what it's about. That will give us a few minutes more to get away."

"Sure your dope is strong enough?"

"The man who fixed it ought to know. He's a registered druggist at Phœnix," replied the range-rider.

Yeager had never before sat in the anxious seat as nervously as he did during the next few hours. His nature was not of the kind to borrow trouble. Usually he could accept responsibility without letting it worry him. But to-night he was playing for big stakes — his own life certainly was in the hazard, probably those of Farrar and Threewit, possibly that of the Texan. And what weighed with him more than all these was the fate of the young girl in the back room upstairs waiting

with a leaden heart for this dreadful thing that was to befall her. It was in the game that a man must take his fighting chance. But a girl — and above all girls Ruth — the thought of it stabbed his heart like a knife.

CHAPTER XXII

A CONSPIRACY

In settling accounts with Harrison the Mexican general had prepared the scene, had arranged every detail of it carefully so as to eliminate any possible chance the heavyweight might otherwise have. Yeager had no intention of letting Pasquale fix the conditions against him as he had against the prizefighter.

"Old Gabriel was holding four aces and Chad only a busted flush. Pasquale knew it all the time. Harrison must 'a' guessed it too. But if he did, I don't see why he waited for the old man to spring his trap," said Steve.

"It's a matter of temperament, I reckon. Some fellows are game enough when you put 'em up against trouble good and hard, but they hang back and wait for it to come to 'em. I expect Harrison did n't know how to play his hand. Looked that way to me when he talked with me. Likely he figured he had better wait and see what happened," surmised the captain.

"He waited too long."

"Till it was too late to call for a new deal. He had to play those dealt him."

"Different here. We'll do the dealing ourselves, captain. Pasquale has been through the deck and taken out all the big picture cards, but I expect I can rustle up a six-full that will come handy." Yeager smiled as he spoke at the .45 he was bestowing about his person.

Together they set the table for poker, putting on it two new decks, one blue and one red, and a box of chips that had seen service in many a midnight fray. On a side table were cigars, cigarettes, and liquor in plenty. Holcomb intended to see that his guests were properly entertained while Steve played the bigger and more dangerous game outside.

The range-rider knew that the odds were against him, that any one of fifty trifling accidents might bring to failure the plan he had made. All he could do was to make his preparations as skillfully as he could and then try to carry them out coolly and with determination.

The Mexican boy who had been hired to act as an attendant on the card-players arrived and Yeager took his leave. The captain followed him to the porch.

"Good luck, Steve," he said quietly.

"Same to you, captain. We'll talk this all over across the line in God's country some time."

"Sure," nodded Holcomb. "Well, so-long."

The younger man answered the nod casually

and turned away down the street. Neither of them thought of shaking hands. Whatever was to happen was all in the day's work. Both of them belonged to that type of Westerner which sees a thing through without any dramatics. That this happened to be a particularly critical thing had no effect on their manner.

Holcomb lit a cigar and sat down on the porch to wait for his guests. They came presently. First were Pasquale and Ochampa, rough and ready as to clothes, unshaven, betraying continually the class from which they had risen. Culvera dropped in after a few minutes. He had discarded his uniform and was in the picturesque regalia of the young Mexican cavalier. From jingling silver spurs to the costly gold-laced sombrero he was every inch the dandy. His manners were the pink of urbanity. Nothing was lacking in particular to the affectionate deference he showed his chief. It suggested somehow the love of a son and the admiration of a devoted admirer.

The general was riding a wave of exhilaration. He had trodden down another of his enemies and was about to take to himself the spoils of the battle. Still in his vigorous prime, he was assured the stars were beckoning him to take the place in Mexico City that neither Madero nor Huerta had been strong enough to hold. He promised himself to settle down to moderation, to have

done with the wild drinking-bouts that still occasionally interfered with his efficiency. Meanwhile, to-night he was again saying farewell to his bachelor days. He drank liberally but not excessively.

Ochampa proposed the health and happiness of the bride. It was drunk with enthusiasm. The general gave them the United States, the sister republic to the north, and spoke affectingly of his desire to promote a better feeling between the countries by this marriage. The host had not expected his poker party to develop so much oratory, but he rose briefly to the occasion. The subject of his remarks was, "A United Mexico."

But it was Culvera who capped the climax. He rose, wineglass in hand, and waited impressively for silence. For five minutes his tongue flowed on in praises of the Liberator of the people. He heaped superlatives on extravagant approval after the fashion of our political orators.

"Need I put a name to this patriot and hero who has won the unbounded love and loyalty of my youth?" he asked rotundly. "Need I name the Bolivar, the Washington of Mexico, the next president of this great republic? If so, I but repeat the name that is on the lips of all the thousands of our people to whom he is as a father — Gabriel Pasquale."

Holcomb smiled behind the hand that stroked his mustache. There was nobody present who

did not know pretty accurately how far Ramon's attachment to his chief went. Gabriel himself, who embraced him affectionately in thanks, had not the least doubt. But if he had no illusions in the matter, he did not intend on that account to warn his lieutenant prematurely that he was next on the list to Harrison.

Poker presently absorbed their attention. Holcomb was the genial host, watchful of their wants and solicitous that they should be supplied. No sign of anxiety betrayed that he was keyed up to a high nervous tension. He told stories, laughed at those of the others, high spaded for drinks (though as a matter of fact he was as host furnishing the liquor), made post-mortem examinations of the deck, and otherwise showed a proper interest. It was quite necessary that when Pasquale looked back over the evening with later developments in mind he should not be able to find any intimations that his host was accessory to the plan to escape.

Hour after hour slipped away. The captain began to let himself hope that the forlorn hope of Yeager had brought safety to his friends. Surely by this time he must either have won or lost his throw for liberty.

A single shot broke the stillness of the night.

Pasquale, dealing, stopped with a card in his hand.

"Funny thing how the guns of sentries are always going off accidentally," remarked Holcomb casually. "Boy, look to the glasses of these gentlemen."

The deal was finished. Culvera opened the pot. The captain stayed. Ochampa hesitated.

One shot, a second, and then a fusillade of them shattered the quiet.

Pasquale flung down his cards and rose hurriedly, overturning his chair. "Mil diablos! What's to pay?" he cried.

The others followed him out of the room and house. He ran down the street as fast as a boy. Already men were emerging from houses half dressed. The sound of shots came from back of the general's headquarters. Pasquale doubled around the house and vaulted a fence. He butted into an excited group and flung men to right and left.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

A soldier pointed to the open window of the room that had been occupied by Ruth Seymour. "She's gone, Your Excellency."

"Gone! Gone where?" roared Gabriel.

"Heaven knows. Her friends have rescued her."

Pasquale broke into a storm of curses.

CHAPTER XXIII

TRAPPED

After leaving Holcomb, Yeager walked down to the river-bed, followed the bank for a couple of hundred yards, and crept forward on all fours through the alfalfa pasture to the barb-wire fence that paralleled the road at some distance. He crawled beneath the lowest wire and moved through the mesquite to a point from which he could see the building where Farrar and Threewit were held prisoners. Two guards with rifles across their shoulders paced up and down outside.

Here Steve lay motionless for about half an hour. He believed that before the poker game began some one of the party would drop around to see that all was quiet and regular in the camp. His guess was a good one. Pasquale himself, arm in arm with Ochampa, made the rounds and stopped for a moment to speak to the sentries in front of the prison. The man crouched in the bear grass could tell that Gabriel was in high good-humor. He jested with the men and clapped them on the shoulder jovially. He laughed as heartily at his own witticisms as they did.

"There shall be mescal to-morrow for the whole army to drink the health of the Liberator and his bride. See to it, Ochampa," he ordered as they walked away.

"Viva Pasquale the Liberator," cried the sentries in a fine fervor of enthusiasm.

Presently the man in hiding stole quietly to the road and advanced down it at a leisurely pace.

"Promising them mescal, eh?" he murmured. "Well, I'll bet a bird in the hand is worth twenty or most sixteen in the bush." He patted affectionately a bottle that lay snug in his pocket.

"Who goes?" demanded one of the prison guards as he approached.

"Pedro Cabenza."

Steve chatted with them for a few moments before he produced his bird in the hand. They told him of what Pasquale had promised. Slyly he looked around to see that they were alone and drew from his pocket the bottle.

"Ho, compañero! Behold what I have. Gringo whiskey — better far than mescal," he cried softly as he handed the treasure to one of the guards.

The man glanced around hurriedly, even as had Cabenza, then tilted the mouth of the bottle over his lips and let a long stiff drink gurgle down his throat. He patted his fat paunch contentedly

and handed the bottle to his companion. The second guard also drank deeply.

Cabenza put an arm across the shoulders of each and drew their heads close while he whispered confidential scandal about Pasquale and Ramon Culvera. The two men listened greedily, eager for more. It happened that there was no truth in the salacious tidbits which Pedro retailed, but he invented glibly and that did just as well.

The heads of his listeners began to nod. They murmured drowsy interjections and leaned more heavily upon his arms. Ineffectually they tried to shake off the lassitude that was creeping over their senses.

"Keep watch, brother, while I take just forty winks," begged one, and fairly thrust his rifle into the hand of Yeager.

The soldier staggered to the adobe wall and slumped down beside the door. His eyes closed, fluttered open again, shut a second time. They did not open. He was fast asleep.

The second guard sat down beside him and smiled up sleepily at the standing man. "Manuel sleeps on duty. He is — a fool. I do — not — sleep. No, I — I —"

His head drooped on his chest. Steve took the rifle that fell from his relaxed hand.

Instantly the American was tapping gently on

the door. "Threewit — Farrar!" he called softly. "This is Steve."

There was the sound of quick footsteps. A voice within answered in a whisper.

"Yes, Steve. This is Frank."

From his pocket the range-rider took a bunch of skeleton keys. It was no trouble to find one that would unlock the door, but in addition to this fastening there was a padlock. With a hatchet which he had brought Yeager pried the staple out. In another moment the door was open.

"Help me drag these fellows inside," ordered the cowpuncher, taking command promptly. "Frank, tear one of those blankets into strips. We've got to tie their hands and feet and gag them. Shuck your coat, Threewit. You've got to wear this fellow's blouse and sombrero. You, too, Frank. It's Manuel's castaways for you. Move lively, boys. This is surely going to be our busy evening."

"What's the programme?" asked Farrar, doing what he was told to do.

Steve explained briefly. "Old Pasquale has got Ruth Seymour here at his house. He intends to marry her to-morrow. I don't mean he shall. A good friend of mine is entertaining the old scoundrel to-night and some of the other high moguls in camp. My notion is to slip into old Gabriel's headquarters and rescue Ruth."

"Has Ruth been here ever since she came down with Harrison that time he lied to her about you being wounded?" asked Threewit. "We were told you butted in and took her home."

"I did. Harrison went to Los Robles later and brought her by force. He was looking for me and bumped into her by chance. His idea was to marry her as soon as they reached camp. But Pasquale balked. He took a fancy to Ruth himself."

While Yeager talked his fingers were busy every moment. From long usage he was expert at roping and tying. Many a time he had thrown the diamond hitch while packing on mountain trails. His skill served him well now. He trussed the guards as if they had been packs for the saddle, binding them hand and feet so that they could not move.

"We heard that an American had been killed in camp to-day. We've been worried for fear it might have been you, Steve," said the camera man.

"It was Harrison. He tried to sell Pasquale out to Farrugia and the old fox got his letter. Pasquale accused him of his treachery and had him assassinated on the spot. Better pull that sombrero lower over your face, Threewit. And keep your hands out of the light as much as you can. They're too white for this section of the country."

"What if some one talks to me? I can't put over their lingo."

"Just grunt. I'll do what talking is necessary. All right. We'll make tracks, boys."

They stepped outside. Yeager relocked the door and drove the staple back into the wood with the end of his rifle by steady pressure and not by blows.

Steve led them through the bear grass into the pasture and across it to the river-bank. Here, under the heavy shadows of the overhanging cottonwoods, he outlined his plans.

Threewit spoke aloud his fears. "But, good Lord! what chance have we got? It's a cinch we can't put four more guards out of business without being seen. And if we are caught —" His voice failed him.

The cowpuncher looked at him, and then at Farrar. The camera man was pale, but his eyes met those of his friend steadily. Steve judged he would do to tie to, that his nerve would pull him through. But the director was plainly shaken with fears. He was not a coward, but the privations and anxieties of the past ten days had got on his nerves. His lips twitched and his fat hand trembled. His life had fallen in too soft and easy places for this sort of thing.

The cowboy reassured him gently, even as he rearranged his plans on the spot. "We're going to pull it off, but as you say there is a chance we

won't make it. I'm going to leave you in the corral with the horses. If Frank and I should slip up and get caught you'll still have a chance to get away."

"I'm going through with it just the same as you boys," insisted the director shakily.

"You're going to do as I say, Threewit. I'm elected boss of this rodeo. One of us has got to stay by the horses to make sure they're ready when we need 'em. That's going to be you. You're to sit right steady on the job till we come. If you hear shooting, — and if we don't show up in a reasonable time after that, — light out and save your hide. Keep that star — see, the bright one close down to the horizon — keep it right in front of you all night. By daybreak you ought to be across the line."

"I'm not going to ride away and leave you boys and Ruth here. What do you take me for?" demanded Threewit huskily.

Steve put a hand on the shoulder of the little man. "You're all right, Billie," he said, with the affectionate smile that men as well as women loved. "We all know you'll do to take along any time when we need a man that's on the level. You wait there at the corral. If we show up, good. If we don't — well, we'll be beyond help. There'll be nothing left for you to do but burn the wind."

Frank swallowed hard. "What Steve says goes with me, Billie."

"Good." Yeager turned briskly to the business in hand. "We might as well be on our way, boys. There's no hurry, because I want Pasquale and Culvera to get settled at their game. But I reckon we'll drift along easy like."

They waded the river, which at its deepest did not reach to their calves, and scrambled up the opposite bank to a bench of shale. Yeager, after a short search, found hidden under the foliage of a prickly pear the rope he had left there some hours earlier. They were in a large fenced pasture where were kept the horses of the officers. At one end could be seen dimly the outline of a little corral.

"You boys head across that way and wait for me. The remuda is at the other end of the pasture under the care of a boy," explained the cowpuncher.

"Had n't I better go along with you in case of trouble?" asked Farrar.

"There is n't going to be any trouble. I'm getting the horses for Pasquale. See?"

After the others had left him, Steve lit a cigarette and sauntered to the far end of the field. Presently he gave a call that brought an answer. The horses were grazing in a loose herd that cov-

ered perhaps a third of an acre. From behind them emerged a youth on horseback.

"I want four horses in a hurry," announced the range-rider.

"What for?"

"Never mind what for, compadre. I did n't ask old Gabriel what for when he sent me," grumbled the messenger.

"Why did n't you say for Pasquale?" The young man was preparing his rope swiftly and efficiently. "Did the general say what horses?"

"He named the roan with the white stockings and the white-nosed buckskin."

"Then he 's going to travel fast and far. Why, in the devil's name, since he is going to be married in the morning?"

"Why does the general always do what is n't expected? The saints know. I don't," growled Steve.

Both of them were expert ropers. In five minutes the American was swallowed in the darkness. He was astride the bare back of the buckskin and was leading the other ponies. As soon as he knew he was safely out of sight and hearing, he deflected toward the corral.

His friends were waiting for him anxiously. Steve dropped lightly to the ground.

"Hold the horses a minute, Frank," he said.

Striding to a feed-stall filled with alfalfa, he

tossed the hay aside and dragged to the light a saddle. Presently he uncovered a second, a third, and a fourth.

"Brought them here last night — stole them from the storehouse," he explained casually.

"You did n't overlook any bets — thought of everything, even to saddle-blankets and water-bags already full," contributed Farrar, digging up these supplies from the alfalfa.

Steve cinched the saddles himself, though Farrar was a fair horseman. If it came to a pinch the turning of a saddle might spoil everything, and so far as he could the range-rider was forestalling any accidents that might be due to carelessness.

"How long am I to wait for you?" asked Threewit.

"We'd ought to be back inside of an hour and a half — if luck's with us. But we may be delayed by some one hanging around. Give us two hours or even two and a half — unless hell begins to pop." Steve looked at his watch in the moonlight. "Say till twelve o'clock. Of course, when you go, you'll leave the other horses here on the chance that we come later. You'd better ride that round-bellied bay."

"Am I to follow the star right up the hill?"

"No. Better take the draw. The sentinels will be on the hill. Likely they'll see you and shoot

at you. But don't stop, even if they're close. Keep a-going. They can't hit a barn door."

"Neither can I," lamented the director.

"Then you'll all be safe." Yeager turned to Farrar. "Come on, Frank."

The two crossed the pasture to the river and waded through the shallow stream to the other side. They remained in the shadows of the bank, following the bend of the river as it circled the village. Through the cottonwoods they crept toward the rear of the two-story house where Pasquale lived and Ruth was held prisoner.

From a sandy spot at the foot of a cottonwood tree Yeager dug a rope ladder.

"Been making it while I was night-herding the remuda," he told Farrar in answer to a surprised question.

"Beats me you did n't make an auto for us to get away in," answered his admiring friend with a grin.

"Wait here," whispered Steve. "I'm going forward to look the ground over. Keep your eyes open in case I give a signal."

The range-rider snaked his way toward the house, moving so slowly and noiselessly that Farrar lost sight of him entirely and began to wonder where he had gone. It must have been nearly twenty minutes later that he caught a glimpse of him without his rifle. Yeager was

engaged in confidential talk with a guard in uniform. Frank saw the bottle pass from his friend to the Mexican, who took a pull at it. A second guard joined the two presently. He also took a drink.

The three disappeared together into the shadowy darkness of the house wall. Farrar was wondering what had happened when a single figure emerged into the moonlight and made a signal for him to come forward.

Yeager did not wait for him, but climbed up the post of the back porch as he had done once before. The camera man was on hand by the time Steve reached the roof. He looked up silently while his friend reached across and rapped on the window of a lighted room. The sash was raised very gently.

Ruth leaned out. "Is it you, Steve?" Her voice was tremulous and tearful. It was a safe guess she had been sobbing her misery into a pillow.

"Yes."

He caught hold of the edge of the window and swung across, working himself up and in by sheer power of muscle. Rapidly he fastened the end of the rope ladder to the head of the bed, which he first half lifted and half dragged to the window. The rest of the ladder he threw out.

"Ready, Ruth?" he asked, turning to her.

She nodded. He was offering his arm to help her through the window when a frightened call came from below.

"Steve!"

He looked down. A Mexican trooper, one of those set to guard the front of the house, was approaching. A glance was enough to show that he knew something to be wrong. His startled eyes passed from Farrar to the rope ladder. They followed it from the ground to the window. He stopped, almost under the window. The camera man, taken aback, did not know what to do. Was he to run the risk of a shot? Even while he hesitated the man in uniform reached for a revolver.

Yeager knew what to do, and he did it promptly. Sweeping Ruth back from the window, he clambered through himself and poised his body for the leap. The sentry looked up again, saw what was about to happen, and let out a startled scream at the same instant that he flung up an arm and fired. Steve felt a sharp sting in his leg as he descended through the air. He landed astride on the shoulders of the Mexican. The man went to earth, hammered down so hard that the breath was driven from his body.

The arm of the range-rider rose and fell once. In his hand was the blue barrel of a revolver. The corrugated butt of the .45 had crashed into

the thick matted hair of the Mexican. But it had done its work. Yeager rose quickly. The soldier lay still.

Already Ruth was coming down the swaying ladder. She dropped the last few rounds with a rush, plump into the arms of Steve.

"Let us hurry — hurry," she cried.

It was time to be gone, if not too late. Already men were converging upon them from different sides. Others were bawling orders for soldiers to turn out.

Steve went down almost as quickly as he had risen. His leg had given way unexpectedly.

Before he reached his feet again his revolver was out and doing business.

"Fire at their legs, Frank. All we want to do is to stop them. Ruth, you run ahead, straight for the trees. We'll be with you in a minute," Yeager gave orders quietly.

The girl flashed one look at him, found assurance in his strong, lean face, and obeyed without a word.

Farrar's rifle was already scattering bullets rather wildly into the night. Lead spattered against the adobe wall behind them. But the attackers were checked. Their fire was of a desultory character. There was such a thing as being too impetuous. Who were these men they were assailing? Perhaps they were acting under

orders of Pasquale. Better not be too rash. So the mind of the peon soldiers decided.

As soon as Ruth had reached the shelter of the grove her friends moved to join her. They were halfway across the open when the cowpuncher plunged to the ground again.

The camera man turned and ran back to him. "What is it, Steve? Have they hit you?" he asked anxiously.

"Plugged a pill into my laig as I took the elevator down from the second story. Gimme a hand up."

Frank put an arm around his waist as a support and they reached cover just as the leg failed for a third time. Yeager crawled forward a few yards on his knees into the underbrush.

Soft arms slid around his neck and shoulder as someone plumped down beside him.

"You're wounded. You've been shot," Ruth breathed tremulously.

"Yes," assented Yeager. "Hand me your rifle, Frank."

They exchanged weapons. Steve had already made up his mind exactly what was best to do.

"I'm going to stay here awhile and hold them back. You go on with Ruth, Frank. Leave a horse for me. I'll be along later," he explained.

"We're not going away to leave you here," protested Ruth indignantly.

His voice was so matter of fact and his manner so competent that she had already drawn back, half ashamed, from the caressing support to which her feelings had driven her.

He turned on her eyes cool and steely. "You're going to do as I say, girl. You're wasting time for all of us every moment you stay. Take her, Frank."

Farrar spoke in a low voice of troubled doubt. "But what are you going to do, Steve? We can't leave you here."

The bullets of the Mexicans were searching the grove for them. Any moment one might find a mark.

The range-rider made a gesture of angry impatience. "You obey orders fine, don't you?" His face flashed sudden anger. "Get out. I know my plans, don't I? Pull your freight. Vamos!"

"And you'll be along later, will you?"

"Of course I will. I've got it all arranged. Hurry, or it will be too late."

Ruth half guessed his purpose. She began to sob, but let herself be hurried away by Farrar.

"He's going to stay there. He's not coming at all," she wailed as she ran.

"Sho! Of course he's coming. You know Steve, don't you? He's always got something good up his sleeve."

But though her friend reassured her, he could not still his own fears. Something in him cried out against the desertion of a wounded ally, one who had risked his life to save them all. Still, there was the girl to be considered. If Yeager wanted to give his life for hers he had the right. Many a good man of the Southwest would have done what Steve was doing, given the same circumstances. It was up to him, Farrar, to back his friend's play and see it through.

Yeager crawled on his hands and knees into a mesquite thicket from which he could command a view of the open space back of Pasquale's house. He broke carefully half a dozen twigs that interfered with the free play of his rifle. Then he placed his revolver beside him ready for action. After which he waited, tense and watchful.

Mexicans were swarming about the back of the house. One climbed the rope ladder, looked in the window, and explained with much gesturing to those below that the room was empty. Random shots were thrown toward the river and into the grove. But nobody headed the pursuit. They were waiting for a leader.

Then Pasquale burst furiously into sight around the house. Culvera, Ochampa, and Holcomb followed him. The general flung himself into an excited group, tossing to right and left those who were in his way. He snapped out

questions, gave orders, and stamped over the ground like a madman.

Called by Culvera, he strode forward to one of the drugged guards. In an impotent fury he shook the man, trying to waken him from his sleep; then, raging at his failure, he flung the helpless body against the wall and turned on his heel.

Order began to evolve out of the mob. Pasquale himself organized the pursuit. He spread the line out so that as it advanced it would sweep the whole space to the river. There was no longer any wild firing. Men brought from the stables eight or ten horses for the officers.

As the line moved forward, Yeager thought it time to let the enemy know where he was. He drew a bead on the general, moved his rifle slightly to the left, and fired. Pasquale drew his sword and waved it.

"Take the girl alive. Shoot down the traitor dogs with her," he cried savagely. "One hundred pesos to the man who kills either of them or captures her."

Steve answered this by firing twice, once with his revolver and almost immediately afterward with his rifle. Ochampa sat down suddenly. He had been hit in the leg.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PRISONER

PASQUALE changed his tactics. Having located his prey with fair accuracy, he spread his men so as to converge upon the fugitives as the spokes of a wheel do toward the hub. His instructions were that the men were not to fire unless they were within close enough range to be sure not to hit the girl.

His courage had been tested often enough to be beyond doubt, so Gabriel contented himself with waiting behind his horse for the captives to be brought to him. He had no intention of being killed in a skirmish of this kind as long as he had peons to send forward in his place.

"Bet five dollars gold I have them inside of a quarter of an hour, captain," the Mexican general said, peering across his saddle toward the grove.

"Yes," assented Major Ochampa in a depressed voice. He objected to having camp vagrants take liberties with his leg. "Hope you make an example of them, general."

Pasquale turned, his eyes like cold lights on a frosty night. "They'll pray for death a hundred

times before it comes to them," he promised brutally. Then, with quick surprise, "Where's Holcomb?"

"He went forward with the men."

"Just like him," replied Gabriel, shrugging his shoulders. "The madman must always be in the thick of it. It's the Gringo way."

From his mesquite thicket Yeager kept up as rapid a fire as possible, using rifle and revolver alternately so as to deceive the enemy into believing the whole party was there. His object was merely to gain time for his escaping friends. Ochampa had been wounded as an object lesson, but he did not intend to kill any of those who were surrounding him. If there had been a dozen of them he would have fought it out to a finish, but with one against a thousand he felt it would be useless murder to kill.

Steve fired into the air, knowing that would do just as well to delay the attackers. Each time he fired his revolver he called aloud softly to himself the number of the shot. It was essential to his plan that there should be one bullet left the moment before they took him.

He could hear them stumbling toward him through the brush and could make out the dark figures as they crawled forward.

"Four," he counted as he fired his revolver into the air and cut off a twig.

His rifle sang out twice. He waited, listening. Bushes crackled a few yards behind him. Snatching up his revolver, he turned.

"Don't fire, Steve," said a low voice in perfectly good English.

Holcomb came out of the thicket toward him.

"Hello, captain. Nice large warm evening. You out taking the air?" asked the cowpuncher.

"Did the rest get away?"

"Hope so. I had rotten luck. One of the guards plugged me in the leg, so I thought I'd kinder keep the Legion busy while our friends make their getaway."

"Can't you run?"

"Can't even walk." Yeager raised the revolver and fired. "Five. One left now."

His eye met that of the captain. Each of them understood perfectly.

"That first shot of yours just missed Pasquale. Pity you did n't shoot straighter."

"I had a dead beat on the old scamp, but I did n't want him. If Ruth gets away, that's all I ask. He's all kinds of a wolf, but Mexico needs him, I reckon."

"You're right about that, Steve. It would n't have done you any good to lay him out. Here they come."

A man ploughed through the brush toward

them. Another appeared to the left. The face of a third peered around the trunk of an adjacent cottonwood. Of a sudden the grove seemed alive with them.

Raising his gun, Steve nodded farewell to his friend.

A moment before Holcomb had had no intention of interfering, but an impulse that was almost an inspiration gave springs to his muscles. He leaped.

The fling of his arm sent the shot flying wildly into the night. Yeager turned on him furiously as he picked himself up to his knees

"What did you do that for?"

"I don't know — had no intention of it a moment before. Maybe I've done you a bad turn, Steve. It came over me as a hunch that you were coming out of this all right."

"The devil it did. Gimme your gun. Quick!"

It was too late. The Mexicans were closing with him. They flung him down and pegged him to the ground with their weight. He made no attempt to struggle.

"Get off of him. He's my prisoner," roared Holcomb, flinging one of the Mexicans back.

They poured on him a flood of protesting Spanish. They had taken him while he was still at large. The reward was theirs.

"Confound the reward. You may have it, but

the man belongs to me. Get up. He's wounded. Two of you will have to carry him."

"But if he tries to escape, señor —"

"Don't be a fool," snapped Holcomb curtly.

The captain was troubled in his heart. Had he saved this fine young fellow to be the plaything of old Pasquale's vengeance? He knew well enough what would happen to the Arizonian if Ruth escaped. But as long as there was life there was a chance. Something might turn up yet to save him.

When Pasquale found that only an insignificant peon Pedro Cabenza had been taken in his dragnet, he exploded with fury. He ordered the man shot against the nearest wall at once.

Culvera turned the prisoner so that the moon fell full upon his face. He looked searchingly at him. Yeager knew that he was discovered. He spoke in English.

"Good-evening, Colonel Culvera. You've guessed right, but you've guessed it a little too late."

"What is this? Who is this man?" demanded Pasquale harshly.

"The man Yeager, who escaped from you two weeks since," explained Ramon. "He has been in camp with us over a week arranging this girl's escape."

The old general let out a bellow of rage. He

strode forward to make sure for himself. Roughly he seized his prisoner by the hair of the head and twisted the face toward him.

"Sorry I had to leave you so abruptly last time, general. Did you have a pleasant night?" taunted Yeager.

Gabriel choked. He was beyond words.

"I see you have n't been able to get anybody else to assassinate your friend Culvera yet," he said pleasantly.

The American had given up hope of life. He was trying to spur Pasquale into such an uncontrollable anger that his death would be a swift and easy one.

"Tie him hand and foot. Let a dozen men armed with rifles stay in the room with him till I return. Ochampa, I hold you responsible. If he escapes —"

"He won't escape," answered the major. "I'll see to that myself."

"See that you do." Pasquale swung to the saddle and looked around. "Ramon, you're not a fool. Where shall we look for this girl and those with her?" he demanded, scowling.

"They must have horses to escape, general. Except in the stable here, which is guarded heavily, the nearest are across the river in the direction they must be moving."

"Of course. Juan, have the remuda driven up

and let every man saddle his horse. We'll comb these hills if we must. Maldito! She shan't escape me."

He galloped off at the head of his troop, taking the short cut to the pasture.

The prisoner was dragged into the house where Ochampa was staying. A doctor presently arrived and took care of the wounded leg of the major. After he had finished dressing it, he turned to Yeager.

"No use bothering with mine. I'll have worse wounds soon," the man from Arizona told him calmly.

The little doctor smiled genially because his heart was good. "Quien sabe, señor? Yet it is my duty," he reminded his patient gently.

"Old Gabriel might not say so," demurred Steve.

Yet he conceded the point and let the surgeon minister to him. There was no anæsthetic. The patient had to set his teeth and bear the pain while the bullet was removed and the wound washed and dressed. Little beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. The lean muscles of his cheeks stood out like ropes. But no sound escaped his lips.

"You are a brave man," said the doctor when he had finished. "I wish you good fortune, sir."

A faint smile rested in the eyes of the cow-

puncher. "I'm right likely to have it, don't you think?" he asked ironically.

Whether Ochampa suspected Holcomb of being in collusion with his countryman or was merely taking no chances, the prisoner had no way of telling. But the major refused flatly to let the artillery officer into the room.

"Tell him he can see the man after the general returns — if the general wants him to see him." he told the messenger.

They could hear the voice of Holcomb, angry and insistent, protesting against such treatment. But a file of soldiers stood between him and the room. He had to retire defeated.

Slate-colored dawn rolled up without the return of Pasquale. With every passing hour Steve gathered hope. It was certain that Ruth and her friends had escaped through the lines or they must have been brought back long ago. And if they once reached the hills and became lost among them, they would surely be safe from pursuit.

The prisoner was drinking a cup of coffee the doctor had brought him when the sound of horses' hoofs came to him through the open window.

The voice of Pasquale rang out, and at the sound of it Steve's heart grew chill. For there was in the timbre of it a brutal, jovial triumph.

"Take these horses, boys, — feed them, water

them. Let the girl go to her room, Ramon, but see that she is watched every minute. Garcia, attend to the Gringos."

He strode into the room where Yeager was detained. His greedy little eyes sparkled; his face exuded malice and self-conceit.

"Ho, ho, amigo! Who laughs now?" he jeered. "I found your friends — stumbled on them in a pocket of the hills while we were returning. They had lost their way, of course, since Señor Yeager was unfortunately not able to go along. So I brought them home to breakfast. Was I not kind?"

He threw back his head and laughed. Steve said nothing. His heart was sick. He had thrown the dice for his great chance and lost.

"First, to breakfast," repeated the Mexican. "And afterward — the young lady shall have love. Por Dios, you shall be at the wedding," decided Pasquale on malicious impulse, hammering on the table with his great fist.

"If I had only had the sense to pull the trigger last night when I had you at my mercy," Yeager commented aloud.

"Yes, you and all her friends — you shall all be there to wish her joy — even Holcomb, who wearies me with his protests. Maldito! Is Gabriel Pasquale not good enough for a kitchen wench from Arizona?"

"It's an outrage beyond belief."

"And afterward — while the little chatita makes love to Gabriel — her friend Steve whom she loves will suffer his punishment with what fortitude he can."

"And her other friends?"

"Behold, it is a great day, señor. Not so? If the chatita, linda de mi alma (pugnosed one, pretty creature of my love), asks for their freedom, she shall have it. I, Gabriel, will send them home under safe escort. Am I not generous? A kind lover? Not so?"

Steve turned his head away and looked through the window at the sun rising behind the distant hills. There was nothing to be said.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TEXAN TAKES A LONG JOURNEY

PASQUALE was as good as his word. He arranged that Yeager should see the function from first to last. The wounded man, his hands tied behind his back, heavily guarded, was in the front row of the crowd which lined the short walk between the headquarters of the general and the little adobe church. The petty officer in command told him that after the bridal procession had passed he was to be taken into the balcony of the church for the ceremony.

"And afterward, while Gabriel makes love to the muchacha, the Gringo Yeager will learn what it means to displease the Liberator," promised the brown man with a twinkle of cruel little eyes.

Steve gave no sign that he heard. He understood perfectly that the ingenuity of Pasquale would make the day one long succession of tortures for him. It was up to him to mask his face and manner with the stoicism of an Apache.

At a little distance he saw Farrar and Threewit, both of them very anxious and pale. He would have called a greeting to them except that he was afraid it might prejudice their chances.

Captain Holcomb passed in front of him and stopped.

"Mornin', Steve," he said.

"Mornin', captain." The haggard eyes of the cowpuncher asked a question before his lips framed it. "Can't you do anything for the little girl? Has this hellish thing got to go through?"

"The prisoner will keep silent," snapped the Mexican sergeant.

Holcomb looked at the man with eyes of chill authority. "When I speak to the prisoner he answers. Understand?"

"Si, señor," muttered the sergeant, taken aback. "But the general said —"

"Forget it," cut in the Texan crisply. He turned to Yeager and spoke deliberately, looking straight at him. "Pasquale is going through with this thing. Just as sure as the old reprobate is alive the padre will marry your little friend to him within half an hour."

Was Captain Holcomb giving him a message? Steve did not know. It seemed to him that there was some hidden meaning in the long look of the steady eyes.

The soldier nodded curtly and turned away. The Texan was dressed with unusual care. He was wearing tanned boots newly polished and the trim khaki uniform of an officer of the United States Army. Looking at him, Yeager thought he

had never seen a finer figure of a man. He carried himself with the light firmness of a trained soldier.

The cowpuncher was puzzled. Had Holcomb an ace up his sleeve? If so, what could it be? He had said that the marriage would be pushed through *just as sure as Pasquale was alive.* Had there been the slightest emphasis on that part of the sentence? Steve was not certain. It had struck him that the captain's soft voice had lingered on the words, but that might have been fancy. Yet he could not escape the feeling that something tragic was impending.

The chattering of the peons crowded in the road died away as if at a signal. From the other end of the line rose a shout. "Viva Pasquale! Viva Pasquale!"

Troopers pushed through and opened up a lane.

The general was for once in full uniform. Evidently he had just come from the hands of a barber. His fierce mustache and eyebrows had been trimmed and subdued. He smiled broadly as he bowed to the plaudits of his men.

Then he turned and Steve caught sight of the bride. Colorless to the lips, she trembled as she moved forward, her eyes on the ground.

It was as if some bell rang within her to tell of the presence of her lover. Ruth raised her big

sad eyes and they met those of Steve. Her lips framed his name soundlessly. She seemed to lean toward him, straining from Pasquale, whose arm supported her.

Somehow she broke free and flung herself toward the man she loved. Her arms fastened around his neck. With a shivering sob she clung tightly to him.

Pasquale, his eyes stabbing with brutal rage, dragged her back and held her wrist in his sinewy brown hand. His teeth were clenched, the veins in his temples swollen. He glared at the cowpuncher as if he would like to murder him on the spot.

The padre touched Gabriel on the arm. With a start the Liberator came to himself. The procession moved forward again. Not a word had been spoken, but Pasquale's golden smile had vanished. The fingernails of his clenched fist bit savagely into the palm of his hand.

From the procession Culvera saluted Yeager ironically. "Buenos and adios, señor."

The man to whom he spoke did not even know the Mexican was there. His eyes and his mind were following the girl who was being driven to her doom.

From out of the crowd edging the walk a man stepped. It was Adam Holcomb. He stood directly in front of Pasquale and his bride,

blocking the way. There was a strange light in his eyes. It was as if he looked from the present far into the future, as if somehow he were a god, an Olympian who held in his hand the shears of destiny.

The general, still furious, flung an angry look at him. "Well?" he demanded harshly.

"I want to ask the lady a question, general."

Impatient rage boiled out of Pasquale in an imperious gesture of his arm. "Afterward, captain. You shall ask her a hundred. Move aside."

"I'll ask it now. This wedding does n't go on until I hear from the young lady that she is willing," he announced.

Ruth tried to run forward to him, but the iron grip of the Mexican stayed her. "Save me," she cried.

"By God! I will."

"Arrest that man," ordered Pasquale in a passion.

At the same time he pushed Ruth from him into the crowd that lined the path. The brown fingers of the Mexican chief closed upon the handle of his revolver.

"Here's where I go on a long journey," the Texan cried.

He dragged out an army forty-five. Pasquale and he fired at the same instant. The Mexican clutched at his heart and swayed back into the

crowd. Holcomb staggered, but recovered himself. He faced the other Mexican officers, tossed away his revolver, and folded his arms.

"Whenever you are ready, gentlemen," he said quietly.

Ramon Culvera was the first to recover. From his automatic revolver he flung a bullet into the straight, erect figure facing him. The others crowded forward and fired into the body as it began to sink. The Texan gave a sobbing sigh. Before his knees reached the ground he was dead.

The suddenness of the tragedy, its unexpectedness, held the crowd with suspended breath. What was to follow? Was this the beginning of a massacre? Each man looked at his neighbor. Another moment might bring forth anything.

With a bound Ramon vaulted to the saddle of a horse standing near. His sword made a half-circle of steel as it swept through the air. From where he sat he could be seen by all.

"Brothers of the Legion, patriots all, let none become excited. I have killed with my own hand the traitor who shot our beloved leader. Gabriel Pasquale is dead, but our country lives. Viva Mexico!"

The answer came from thousands of brown, upturned faces. "Viva Mexico! Viva Culvera!"

The young officer swung the sword around his head. His eyes flashed. "Gracias. Friends, I

solemnly pledge my life to the great cause of the people. Our hero is dead. We mourn him and devote ourselves anew to the principles for which he fought. Never shall I lay down this sword until I have won for you the rights of a free nation. I promise you land for all, wealth for all, freedom from tyranny. Down with all the foes of the poor."

Again the shouts rang out, this time louder and clearer. Already these simple, childlike peons were answering the call of their new master. Old Pasquale, who for years had held their lives in the hollow of his hand, lay crumpled on the ground almost forgotten. A new star was shining in their firmament.

"We shall march to Mexico, down the usurper, and distribute the stolen wealth of him and his pampered minions among the people to whom it belongs. Every Mexican shall have a house, land, cattle. He shall be the slave of none. His children shall be fed. We shall have peace and plenty. I, Ramon Culvera, swear it. Mexico for the Mexicans."

Culvera was an orator. His resonant voice stirred the emotions of this ragged mob that under the leadership of Pasquale had been hammered into an army efficient enough to defeat well-armed regulars. The men pressed closer to listen. Their primitive faces reflected the excite-

ment the speaker stirred in them. They interrupted with shouts and cheers.

Others among the officers had ambitions for leadership, but they knew now that Ramon had made the moment his and forestalled them. He had won the army over to him.

He spoke briefly, but he took pains to see that no other speaker followed him. The plaudits for "General Culvera" rang like sweet music in his ears. They told him that he had at a bound passed the officers who ranked him and was already in effect chief of the Army of the North.

Briefly he gave directions for the care of the body of the dead general and for the safety of the American prisoners pending a disposition of their cases. Before dismissing the army, he called an immediate conference of the officers.

Resolved to strike while the iron was hot, Culvera took charge of the meeting of officers and proposed at once the election of a general to succeed Pasquale. His associates were taken by surprise. They looked out of the windows and saw pacing up and down the armed sentries Ramon had set. They heard still an occasional distant cheer for the new leader. Given time, they might have organized an opposition. But Culvera drove them to instant decision. They faced the imperious will of a man who would stick at nothing to satisfy his ambition.

Moreover, Ramon was popular. He was of a good family, democratic in manner, never arrogant on the surface to his equals. It had been his object to make friends against the possibility of just such a contingency. Most of the officers liked, even though they did not fully trust him. They recognized that he had the necessary confidence in himself for success and also the touch of dramatic genius that may make of a soldier a public idol.

For which reasons they submitted to his domination and elected him successor of Pasquale as commander of the Legion of the North. Whereupon Ramon unburdened himself of another fiery oration of patriotism full of impossible pledges.

The newly chosen general sent an orderly out to proclaim the day a holiday and to see that mescal was served to all the men in honor of the event. After which the conference discussed the fate of the American prisoners.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT SUNSET

STEVE, in solitary confinement, with only his throbbing leg for company, was under no illusions as to what his punishment would be. Pasquale had been killed by an American who had been seen talking with Yeager five minutes before he had shot the general. The charge against him would probably be conspiracy, but it did not much matter what the excuse was. His life would be snuffed out certainly.

There were several reasons why Culvera should sacrifice him and not one why he should be spared. Ramon had a personal grudge against him, and the new commander was not a man to forget to pay debts of this kind. Moreover, the easiest way to still any whispered doubts of his own loyalty to Pasquale was to show sharp severity in punishing those charged with being implicated in his death.

Yeager accepted it as settled that he was doomed.

But what about his friends? What of Threewit and Farrar? And, above all, what of Ruth? Would Culvera think it necessary to extend his

vengeance to them? Or would prudence stay his hand after he had executed the chief offender?

Culvera was a good politician. The chances were that he would not risk stirring up a hornet's nest by shooting a man as well known in the United States as Threewit. Since Farrar was in the same case, he would probably stand or fall by the Lunar director. As for Ruth — her *life* would be safe enough. There was no doubt of that. But — what of her future?

Ramon was a known libertine. No scruples would restrain him if he thought the game was a safe quarry. And Steve knew with a sinking heart that he could offer to any official inquiry of the United States Government a plausible story of an abandoned woman who had come to camp to sell her charms to the highest bidder. It would be easy to show that she had ridden down with a man suspected of being a rustler and known to be a bad character, that she had jilted him for Pasquale who was already married and a good deal more than twice her age, and that after the death of Gabriel she had turned at once to his successor. To twist the facts in support of such an interpretation of her conduct would require only a little distortion here and there. The truth, twisted, makes the most damnable lies.

Without any heroics Holcomb had given his life to save her because she was an American

woman. Yeager counted himself a dead man in the same cause. What wrung his heart now, and set him limping up and down his cell regardless of the pain from his wounded leg, was the fear that the price had been paid in vain. Little Ruth! Little Ruth! His heart went out to her in an agony of despair.

While he clung rigid to the window bars of his prison the rusty lock in the door creaked. The sergeant with the cruel little eyes entered with three men.

"Ho, ho! The general wants the Gringo to cut out his heart and liver. Come! Let us not keep him waiting. He is sharpening the knife and it may lose the edge."

A horse was waiting outside and the prisoner was assisted to the saddle. One man led the horse by the bridle and on either side of Yeager rode a second and a third. All of them were armed. The new general was taking no chances of an escape.

At sight of the American the young Mexican at the head of the long table where Pasquale had held his councils showed a flash of fine teeth in a glittering smile.

"Welcome, Señor Yeager. How is the wounded leg?"

Steve nodded casually. "It's talking to me, general, but I reckon it's good enough to do

all the walking I'll ask of it," he answered quietly.

Culvera turned with a laugh to Ochampa. "He is what the Gringoes call game. Is it not so, major?"

Ochampa, his wounded leg on a chair, grunted.

"Turn about is fair play. How is *your* leg, major?" asked Steve.

The major glared at him. "Is it that I must put up with the insolence of this scoundrel, general?" he demanded.

"Not for long," replied Culvera suavely. "Pedro Cabenza, or Yeager, or whatever you call yourself, you have been tried for rebellion, insubordination, and conspiracy to kill General Pasquale. You have been sentenced to be shot at sunset. The order of the military court will be carried out as decreed."

The cowpuncher took it without the twitching of a muscle in the brown face. He knew there was no use of an appeal for mercy and he made none.

"So I've been tried and convicted without even being present. Fine business. I reckon you've got an explanation handy when Uncle Sam comes asking whyfor you murdered an American citizen."

Culvera lifted in mock surprise his eyebrows. "An American citizen! Surely not. I execute Pedro Cabenza, a peon, enlisted in the Army of

the North, because he plotted with the foes of the Republic and helped prisoners escape, and because he conspired to assassinate our glorious chief, General Pasquale." Ramon put his forearm on the table and leaned forward with an ironic smile. "But your point is well made, Pedro. Lies spread on the wings of the wind. I shall forestall any slanderous untruths by having a photograph taken of you before the execution, and another of your body afterward. I thank you for the suggestion."

Though it told against him the American knew this was a bull's-eye hit. A photograph of him in his rags, with his serape and his ventilated sombrero, face as brown as a berry, would be sufficient proof to exonerate Culvera of the charge of having shot an American. Steve had made up too well for the part. At worst Culvera could plead a regrettable mistake.

"You make out a good case against Pedro Cabenza, general," admitted the condemned man evenly. "Good enough. We'll put him in the discard. I suppose you won't deny that Threewit and Farrar and Miss Seymour are Americans."

With a confidential grin Ramon nodded. "You've put your finger on the pulse of my difficulty. You see, I talk to you frankly because I have the best of reasons for knowing you will

never betray me. No doubt you recall your proverb about dead men telling tales. Just so. Well, I don't know what the devil to do with your friends Farrar and Threewit. I have nothing against them, but if I send them home they will talk. Would it be best, do you think, to arrange an accident for them while on the way back to Arizona?"

"Not at all. I'll make a written confession, and they can sign it as witnesses, that I plotted against Pasquale and was implicated in his murder. That will let you out nicely, general. Then you can send them home, and the young lady in their care. So you will even scores with me quite safely to yourself."

The Mexican commander looked steadily out of the window at a dog scratching himself in the street. "I don't recall mentioning the young lady. Her future is arranged."

The temples of the cowpuncher throbbed. He pretended to misunderstand the meaning of the other man. "Of course. I understand that you can do nothing else but send her home. The one thing that would bring our army across the line on the jump would be for you to hurt a hair of this girl's head. You could kill a dozen men and get away with it quicker than you could to insult one little girl. But, of course, you know that."

The fingers of Culvera drummed absently on

the table. "I think the señorita and I will be able to adjust the matter without any help from you. If you have any last messages for her I'll be glad to carry them, since I expect to see her this evening."

Steve had disdained to beg for himself, but now he begged for the girl he loved.

"You're a man, Ramon Culvera. Nobody ever claimed there is any yellow in you. Your father was a gentleman and so is his son. You fight with men and not with timid girls. You would n't do this girl dirt because she is alone and has no friends near. Think of your own sisters, man."

Ochampa moved restlessly in his chair. "We had better send the girl home. She will bring us trouble else."

His superior officer flashed a quick look at him. "That is a bridge we shall cross when we come to it. Meanwhile I say adios, Señor Yeager. Shall I send you the padre?"

"Thanks, no! But remember this. You stake your whole future on the treatment you give Miss Seymour. If you don't play fair with her, you lose."

Ramon clapped his hands three times. A soldier entered the room.

"Take the Gringo back to his prison," ordered Culvera.

"The order stands, general? At sunset?" asked the man.

"It stands," assented Ramon; and turned to Ochampa: "Have you agreed on a price for that bunch of cattle with the Flying D rustlers, major?"

CHAPTER XXVII

CULVERA RECONSIDERS

SPURRED by Daisy Ellington, the star of the border Lunar Company had kept the wires hot with messages to "the old man" in New York. To do him justice the president of the company rose to the occasion as soon as it was impressed upon his mind that Threewit and the others were in serious danger. He telegraphed for Lennox to meet him in Washington and hurried to the Capitol himself to lay the case before the senior Senator from New York, a statesman who happened to be under political obligations to him.

The Arizona congressional delegation was called into conference and an appointment made to meet the President of the United States. As soon as Lennox reached the city, he was hurried to the White House, where he told the story before the President and the Secretary of State.

The case called for prompt action. Instructions were wired to Captain Girard, stationed with his company at Bisbee, Arizona, to act as a special envoy from the President to General Pasquale.

Girard, with a corporal, two saddle-horses, and

a pack-horse, entrained at once. Four hours later he was dropped at a tank station, from which point he and the corporal struck straight into the barren desert. The glare of the afternoon sun was slanting down upon them when they started. Their shadows grew longer as they rode. The sun, a ball of fire, dropped below the distant horizon edge and left a sky of wonder to drive a painter to despair.

The gold and crimson and purple softened as the minutes passed. The distant ridges were no longer flamed with edgings of fire. A deep purple predominated and was lightened presently to a velvet violet haze. Then the stars came out, close and cold and innumerable.

Still Girard rode, taking advantage of the cool breath of night. Toward morning he stopped at a sand-wash where three or four dusty cottonwoods relieved the vegetation of mesquite, palo verde, and cacti. Among the rocks a spring rose hesitant to the surface and struggled faintly for life against the palpitating heat and thirsty drought of the desert.

The corporal hobbled the horses. The men stretched themselves in the sand and fell into deep sleep. It was noon when they awoke. They ate, lounged in such shade as the cottonwoods offered from the quivering heat, and waited till mid-afternoon. Having saddled and repacked,

they struck again across the dreary roll of sand-hills and washes. When Noche Buena lay at their feet the sun was low in the sky.

Into the dusty main street of the village the two men rode at a walk. A sentinel with a rifle stopped them. Girard explained that he wanted to see Pasquale.

"He is dead — shot by a Gringo who has gone to hell already. And another Gringo will be shot when the sun falls below the hills, and perhaps another to-morrow. Who knows? You, too, may pay for the death of the Liberator," jeered the sentry.

"Pasquale dead — and shot by an American?" asked the captain in surprise.

"As I have said. But General Culvera killed the dog in his tracks. Ho, Manuel! Call an officer. A Gringo wants to see the general," he shouted to a barefoot trooper crouched in the shade of an adobe house.

Girard explained to the officer that he was a messenger from the President of the United States. He and the corporal were searched and their arms removed.

The Mexican officer apologized. "Since Pasquale was murdered, we take no chances," he explained. "You understand I do not at all doubt you are what you say. But we search all strangers to make sure."

After Culvera had glanced over the credentials of Girard, he was all suavity. "I offer you a hundred welcomes; first for yourself, as an officer of the army of our sister Republic, and second as an envoy from your President, for whom I have a most profound respect. But not a word of your mission until we have dined. You will want first of all a bath after your long dusty trip. May I offer you my own quarters for the present till arrangements can be made?"

Captain Girard bowed. "You are very kind, general. Believe me, I appreciate your courtesy. But first I must raise one point. I have been told that an American is to be executed at sunset, which is almost immediately. You will understand that as a representative of the United States it is necessary that I should investigate the facts."

Swiftly Culvera considered. If the American officer had arrived an hour later, Yeager would have been safely out of the way. How had he discovered already that an American was to be shot? Was it worth while denying it? But what if Girard insisted on seeing the execution? What if he asked to see Yeager? Ramon's glance swept the obstinate face of the captain. He decided it better to acknowledge the truth.

"It is to me a matter of profound regret," he sighed. "The man enlisted in our army as a spy,

disguised as a peon. He is guilty of the murder of one of our men in a gambling-house. He attempted to kill General Pasquale a short time ago. He was undoubtedly in league with the man Holcomb, the assassin of our great general. He shot Major Ochampa, but fortunately the major is recovering. The man is a border ruffian of the worst stamp."

"May I talk with him, general?"

"But certainly — if the man is still living," assented the Mexican.

The American officer looked straight at Ramon. His steady eyes made no accusation, mirrored no suspicion. Culvera could not tell what he was thinking. But he recognized resentfully a compulsion in them that he could not safely ignore.

"With your permission I should like to talk also with Miss Seymour and the two moving-picture men," said Captain Girard.

The Mexican adventurer announced a decision he had come to that very instant, one to which the inconvenient arrival of the envoy from the President of the United States had driven him.

"I am making arrangements to have them all three taken safely back to Arixico. Between you and me, captain, old Pasquale was something of a savage. It is my purpose to win and hold the friendship of the United States. I don't underestimate Pasquale. He was my friend and chief

He made a free Mexico possible. But he was primitive. He did not understand international relations. He treated the citizens of your great country according to his whims. That was a mistake. I shall so act as to win the approval of your great President."

"I am very glad to hear that. The surest foundation upon which you can build for a free Mexico is justice for all, general. And now, if I may see Yeager."

A messenger was sent to bring the prisoner. He found an officer with a firing party already crossing the plaza to the place of execution. The prisoner was bareheaded, ragged, unkempt. His arms were tied by the elbows behind his back. But the spirit of the unbeaten spoke in his eyes and trod in his limping step.

"The general wishes to see the prisoner," explained the messenger to the officer.

The party wheeled at a right angle, toward the headquarters of Culvera.

Steve thought he understood what this meant. Culvera had sent for him to gloat over him, to taunt him. The man wanted to hear him beg for his life. The teeth of the cowpuncher clenched tightly till the muscles of the jaw stood out like ropes. He would show this man that an American did not face a firing squad with a whine.

At sight of the captain of cavalry sitting beside

Culvera the heart of Yeager leaped. The long arm of Uncle Sam had reached across the border in the person of this competent West Pointer. It meant salvation for Ruth, for his friends, possibly even for himself.

"Captain Girard wants to ask you a few questions," Culvera explained.

Without waiting for questions Yeager spoke. "Do you know that an American girl is held prisoner here, captain, — that Pasquale was driving her to a forced marriage when Holcomb shot him to save her?"

Girard turned toward the general, a question in his eyes.

Ramon shrugged his shoulders. "I told you Pasquale was a barbarian. The trouble is he was a peon. He took what he wanted."

"Her name is Ruth Seymour. She's a fine girl, captain. You'll save her, of course, and see that she gets home," continued Steve.

"I have the promise of General Culvera to see her and your friends safe to Arixico," replied Girard.

"You'll ride with them yourself all the way," urged the prisoner.

"No doubt. But, of course, the word of General Culvera —"

"— Is worth what it is worth," Yeager finished for him.

"The man stands in the shadow of death. Let him say what he likes," said the Mexican contemptuously to the officer beside him.

"You are charged with being a spy, Mr. Yeager. I am told you were captured in disguise after having plotted to help prisoners escape," said Girard.

Yeager nodded quietly. "Technically I am a spy. I came here to try to save Miss Seymour and my friends. The attempt failed and I was captured."

"Are you a spy in the sense that you were in the employ of the enemies of General Pasquale and his armies?"

"No. Culvera understands that perfectly well. I came only to look out for my friends."

Girard knew what manner of man Yeager was. He intended to save his life if it could be done. This would be possible only if Culvera could be made to feel that it would cost too much to punish him.

"It is claimed that you attempted the life of General Pasquale once."

"Nothing to that. I was a prisoner, condemned to be shot in the morning. He came to my cell and offered me my life if I would knife Culvera in the back. I could n't see the proposition. But I got a chance, knocked him down, tied him up, and slipped out in his serape. Then I made my

getaway on the horse he had left for me in case I came through with the knifing."

Instantly Culvera knew the story to be true. It cannot be said that he was grateful to Yeager, but the edge of his resentment against him was dulled.

"Sounds like a plausible story, does n't it?" he suggested ironically. "Why should Pasquale want the death of his friend, his lieutenant, the man who was closest to him among all his followers?"

"Send for Juan Garcia. He was on sentry duty that night. Ask him as to the facts," the cowpuncher proposed.

Girard turned to his host and spoke to him in a low voice. "General, this man has a good reputation at home. He has a host of friends in Arizona. I believe he is speaking the truth. Perhaps General Pasquale may have been too hasty. Let us send for all the witnesses and make a thorough investigation of the charges against him. I shall be called to Washington after I have wired my report. The President, no doubt, will question me. Make it possible for me to tell him that under the rule of General Culvera a régime begins that is founded on justice for all."

Culvera was far from a fool. He had lived in the United States and understood something of the temper of its people. The fall of Huerta was

potent proof that no ruler could survive in Mexico if the Government at Washington was set in opposition to him. After all, the life of Yeager was only a small matter. Why not use him as a pawn in the game to win the approval of the big Republic to the north?

With his most engaging smile Ramon offered his hand to Captain Girard. "You are right. Pasquale was a child, a creature of moods, of foolish suspicions and tempestuous passions. Perhaps this man tells the truth. It may be he has been condemned unjustly. You and I, my friend, shall sit in judgment on him. If he be guilty, we shall condemn; if innocent, acquit. Meanwhile I will remand him to prison and order the execution postponed. Does that satisfy you, captain?"

The American officer shook hands warmly. "General, it is a pleasure to meet a man like you. Mexico is fortunate in having such a son."

Culvera beamed. "Gracias. And now, captain, — first a bath, then dinner. Afterwards you shall talk with the moving-picture men." He turned affably to Yeager. "I shall give orders that you be given a good dinner to-night. To-morrow we shall pass judgment on you."

Steve nodded to the West Pointer. "Much obliged, captain."

CHAPTER XXVIII

AS LONG AS LIFE

BREAKFAST was served to Yeager next morning by a guard who either knew nothing or would tell nothing of what was going on in the camp. After he had eaten, nobody came near the prisoner for hours. Through the barred window he could see a sentry pacing up and down or squatting in the shade of the deserted building opposite. No other sign of human life reached him.

His nerves were keyed to a high tension. Culvera was an opportunist. Perhaps something had occurred to make him change his mind. Perhaps he had decided, after all, not to play for the approval of the United States. In revolutionary Mexico much can happen in a few hours.

Steve was a man of action. It did not suit his temperament to sit cooped up in a prison while things were being done that affected the happiness of Ruth and his own life. He tried to persuade himself that all was going well, but as the fever of his anxiety mounted, he found himself limping up and down the short beat allowed him from wall to wall.

It was noon before he was taken from his cell.

Steve counted it a good augury that a saddle horse was waiting for him to ride. Last night he had limped across the plaza on his wounded leg.

He and his little procession of guards cut straight across to headquarters. Culvera sat on the porch smoking a cigarette. He was dressed immaculately in a suit of white linen with a blue sash. His gold-trimmed sombrero was a work of art.

At sight of Yeager the Mexican general smiled blandly.

"Are you ready to take a long journey, Señor Yeager?" he asked.

The heart of the cowpuncher lost a beat, but he did not bat an eye. "What journey? The same one that Holcomb took?" he demanded bluntly.

Culvera showed a face of pained surprise. "Am I a barbarian? Do you think me another Pasquale? No, no, señor. You and I have had our disagreements. But they are past. To tell the truth, I always did like the way you see a thing through to a fighting finish. Now that I know you are not the ruffian I had been led to think you, it is a pleasure to me to tell you that you have been tried and acquitted. I offer regrets for the inconvenience to which you have been put. You will pardon, is it not so, and do me the honor to dine with me before you leave?"

The heels of the Mexican came together, he bowed, and offered a hand to the range-rider.

"Just one moment, general. All that listens fine to me, but — what are the conditions?"

Ramon made a gesture of regret at being so sadly misunderstood. "Conditions! There are none."

"None at all?"

"None. Is it that you think me a peddler instead of a gentleman?" The face of the young Mexican expressed sorrow rather than anger.

Still Steve doubted. "Let's understand each other, general. Are you telling me that I can walk out of that door, climb into a saddle, and keep going till I get back into old Arizona?"

"I tell you that — and more. You will be furnished an escort to see you safely across the line. You may choose your own guard if you doubt."

"And my friends?"

"They go, too, of course."

"All of them?"

The Mexican smiled. "You're the most suspicious man I ever knew. All of them, Señor Yeager."

"Including Miss Seymour?" The range-rider spoke quietly, but his eyes were like swords.

"Naturally she will not wish to stay here when her friends leave."

Steve leaned against the porch post with a

deep breath of relaxation. "If I'm sleeping, don't let any one wake me, general," he implored, smiling for the first time.

"I confess your amazement surprises me," said Culvera suavely. "Did you think all Mexicans were like Pasquale? He was a great man, but he was a savage. Also, he was a child at statecraft. I used to warn him to coöperate with the United States if he wished to succeed. But he was ignorant and eaten up with egotism."

"You're right he was, general."

"A new policy is now in operation. In freeing you I ask only that you set me and my army right with your people. Let them understand that we stand for a free Mexico and for justice."

The hands of the two men gripped.

"I'll sure do my share, general."

"We're to have a little luncheon before you go. Captain Girard and your friends are to be my guests. You will join us; not so?"

"Gracias, general. Count me in."

The black eyes of the Mexican twinkled. "Your wound — does it greatly trouble you, señor?"

"Some. When I walk."

"Too bad. I was going to ask you to step upstairs and tell Señorita Seymour that General Culvera will be delighted to have her join us at luncheon. But, of course, since your leg troubles you —"

"It's a heap better already, general. You're giving me good medicine."

"Ah! I think you know the lady's room. But perhaps I had better call a peon."

The eyes of the cowpuncher were bright. "Now, don't you, general. Keep on talking and you're liable to spoil what you've said," answered Steve with his old gay laugh.

He hobbled out of the room and up the stairs.

The door of Ruth's room was open. She sat huddled in a chair looking straight before her. There were shadows under her young eyes that never should have been there. Her lissome figure had lost its gallantry, the fine poise that had given her a note of wild freedom. Steve had come up so quietly that she evidently had not heard, for she did not turn her weary head to see who it was.

He stood a moment, hesitating on the threshold. She sat without moving, a pathetic picture of despair and grief. A man had died for her yesterday. Another man was to die to-day because he had tried to save her. She herself was in danger still. The tragedy of life had carried her beyond tears.

When he moved forward a step she turned. Her lips parted in surprise. The dark eyes under her tumbled, blue-black hair stared in astonishment. Slowly she rose, never lifting her gaze from him.

With a little cry of wonder she stretched her arms toward this man who had come to her as if from the dead.

In two strides he reached her and swept the girl into his arms. He kissed the tired eyes, the tousled hair, the soft cheeks into which the color began to flow. She clung to him, afraid to let him go, uncertain whether it was a reality.

At last she spoke. "It *is* you, is n't it? I thought . . . they told me . . . that you . . ."

He laughed softly with the joy of it all. "I'm free — free to go home with you, Ruth, — back to God's country, to friends and life and love."

"Are you going to take me, too?" she asked with naïve simplicity.

"Is it likely I'd go without you? Yes, we're all going. Culvera has seen the light. Soon all this will be like a nightmare from which we have escaped. That's right, honey. Cry if you want to. Little girl, little girl, how am I ever going to tell you how much I love you?"

She wept with gladness and relief while he held her tightly in his arms and promised to keep her against all harm as long as life lasted.

And afterward, when smiles came again, they fell into the inarticulate babblings that from the beginning of time have been the expression of lovers.

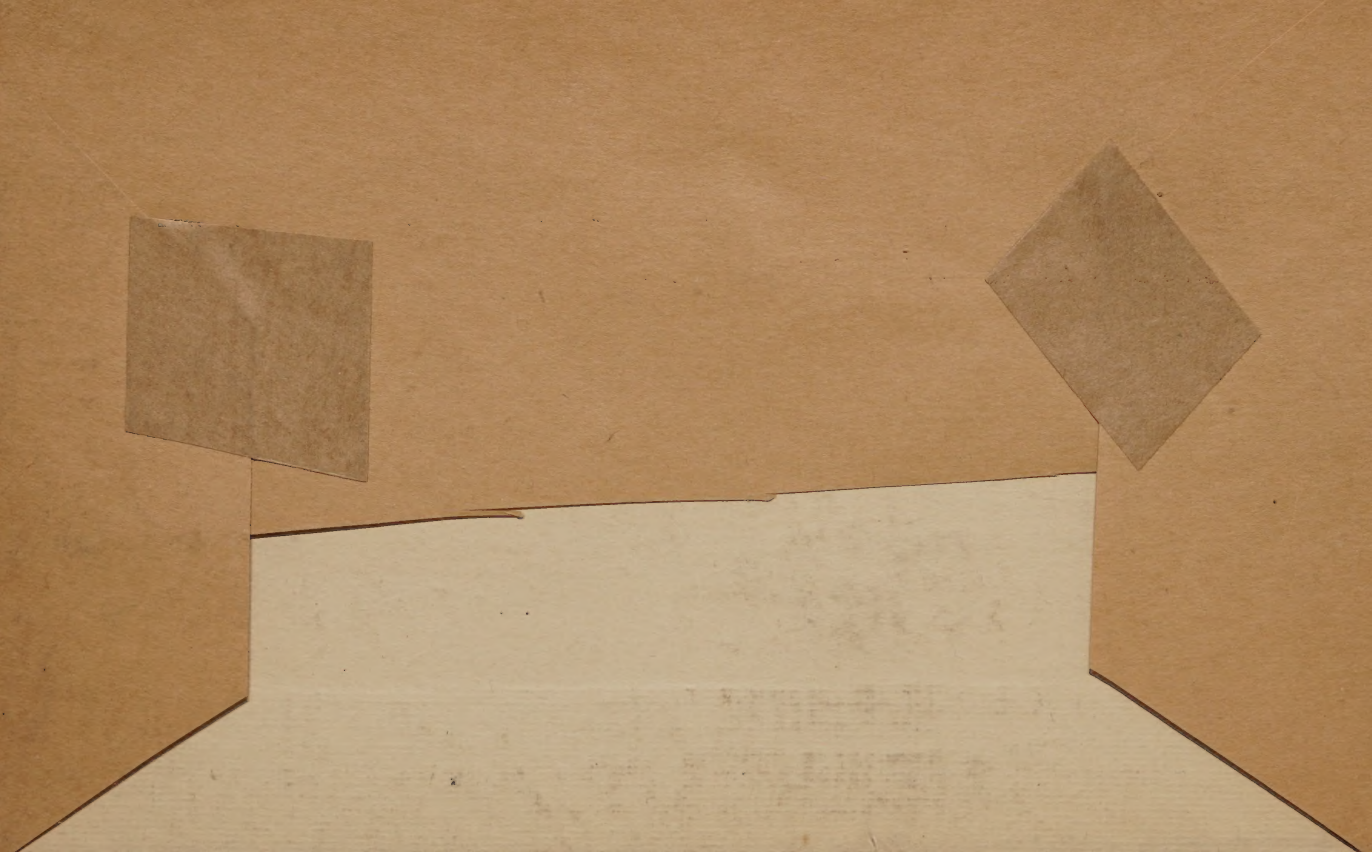
They forgot time, so that neither knew how

long it had been before a denim-clad soldier stood saluting in the doorway.

Steve, over his shoulder, fired a question at the man. "What do you want?"

"The compliments of General Culvera, señor and señorita, and I was to remind you that luncheon has been waiting twenty minutes."

Steve and Ruth looked at each other and laughed. They went downstairs hand in hand.

THE END

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